



**TEXTUAL
TRANSFORMATION
BAMBOO
academics**

TEXTUAL TRANSFORMATION BAMBOOZLES ACADEMICS

TTBA Magazine - Easter 2023

A production of the Cambridge University Science Fiction Society

hereafter CUSFS

Textual Transformation Bamboozles Academics

TTBA Volume π Issue *apple*

Contents

COVER ART

Luxi Xiong 1

EDITORS' ADDRESSES

Rosalind Mackey; Alex Colesmith 4

CHAINWRITING

Ark 5

The Carnival of Beasts 9

A City With No Colour 20

Practical Applications of Cryptography for the Art of Spellcraft 26

Murder at Twenty Thousand Feet 37

Cube Root 44

ORIGINAL WORKS

These People You Call Friends: Part 1 15

Chris Pang

The Ultimate Tshowdown! 24

Multiple Anonymous

The Emperor's Eyes 31

Marko Trandafilovski

Strangeling 43

Alex Sandground

ARTWORK

The Cuddly Alien 4; 48

Jeremy Henty

The Carnival of Beasts 14

Lily Mansfield

Outgoing Editor's Address

So, it has come to the end of my editorship. As last issues go, this is a pretty incredible finish. There's a huge range of content in this issue, all executed very well. I found every single chain engaging, moving and page-turning, and they were a real pleasure to edit and see come together. It's also been very exciting to be able to fulfil my goal of putting out three TTBA's during my year as Editor and I really appreciate all the hard work people have put into this during their busy Lent and Easter terms.

There's also some high-quality original writing in this issue, which provides a nice thematic contrast to all the chains. There are some who would say that such variety of content isn't possible within the category of SFF, but I think this magazine is evidence of just how broad those two genres are. Prepare for steampunk detectives, mages in Cambridge and two very different takes on the intermingling of horror and science fiction, as well as some classic space adventure.

And that's over and out from me. It's been an absolute pleasure getting to see all your fantastic literary creations in the making. I'll be sad to lose my best form of procrastination, but I know I'll be leaving the magazine in very capable hands. And it'll be nice having time to actually write for TTBA myself, too.

Rosalind Mackey

TTBA Editor 2022-23

Incoming Editor's Address

RIGHT YOU 'ORRIBLE LOT,

How do I even start this? I can't talk about what I'm expecting. If there's one thing that reading all last year's stories taught me, it's that all I can expect is the unexpected. Uncertainty is the only certainty, and I'm not even sure about that. I'm well aware you can write—I've seen it done.

There probably won't be as much of my writing. This isn't a vanity magazine. I've exchanged authorship – mostly, unless chains need filling in, or I come up with a really damn good story – for Absolute Power over my own little dominion. That doesn't sound likely; we all know that only the Reeve of Jóm is all-powerful. But if the Reeve submits something that goes against the CLANG, then I have the power to keep it out of my fiefdom.

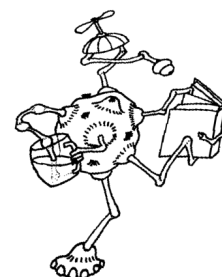
Yes, it's only a small place. A little magazine. But it's mine now, and I will strive to protect and perfect it as well as any scribbling intruder can.

Finally, to quote Terry Pratchett: 'This [magazine] is not wacky. Only dumb redheads in Fifties sitcoms are wacky. No, it's not zany either.' I can't stand either of those words to describe TTBA. In my opinion, they belittle it.

Maces and Masonry (look, Swords and Sorcery was taken!),

Alex Colesmith

TTBA Editor 2023-24



Ark

Alex Colesmith, Long Hei Ng, Apple Juice, Sam Hutton, Anon., Ronan Long, Kitty Liu, Inky Sprite, Maya, Rosalind Mackey

CW: Strong language, blood, violence

“Savi?”

I wriggled out of the engine duct. Jen was floating there in the middle of the corridor, his hair tied back to prevent it going everywhere in zero-g.

“What?”

“Can you switch the gravity back on? Mike is throwing a fit and wants pancakes for breakfast.”

I closed a few of my eyes, rippling colours across my skin, and resisted the urge to brain him with a spanner. “How many times do I need to explain that we’re in Eftiel? If you switch the gravity back on then the Universe starts paying attention to you breaking its rules. And then we’re no better than one of your people’s old ark ships.”

“Oh.” His shoulders slumped downwards. “But what do I do about Mike?”

“If you can’t control your hatchling-”

“-child-”

“-then you shouldn’t have brought it-”

“-her-”

“-aboard the ship.”

“Captain said I could. And you do.”

“Because I can control the hatchlings, yes.” I gestured upwards with one languid tentacle to where three of my young – still in the first larval stage – were playing on the ceiling. “Look, you can have gravity when we come out of Eftiel near the ark ship.”

That was the plan for the mission. One of the first-generation ark ships – slow, huge things, made of hollow asteroids and sent out between stars before my people had ever found humans and shown them how to build Eftiel tech – had been spotted at the edge of our system, and we were heading to investigate, make inventory and do preliminary removal work. Or to put it another way, loot the place.

“Savi, we are coming out of Eftiel,” came the Captain’s voice from up ahead in the cockpit.

“Well, I guess your hatchling got what it wanted,” I grinned at Jen, kicking against the wall and propelling myself to the prep station before he could try to impose his

vocabulary on me again. “Ready, Captain,” I called back.

“Good. And now three... two...”

I pulled on the lever. Right on time, as the gravity hummed back to life, the ship dropped into real-space with the familiar shudder. I could hear Jen swear behind me as he landed uncomfortably against a table corner. “Come on now,” I gestured to Jen, making my way up to the cockpit for the customary briefing.

“So here we are.” The Captain gave me a brief glance as I walked in. His face was expressionless, as usual, something I found a little unnerving given his youth even by Earthling standards. Sure enough, the ark ship was right up ahead, about fifty clicks away. It was an ugly thing – crude, rotund and unwieldy. Our sensors, already locked onto the target, were flashing red. The ship was still in one piece, but barely. It was ready to break apart any minute.

“No patrols,” mused the Captain, easing the throttle forward. Unusual, given the new sector governor’s obsession with scavengers. A police squadron would normally already have cordoned off the entire area. Yet according to one of Jen’s underworld contacts, the governor’s lackeys were not yet aware of the ship’s existence. They would soon be here, but by then we would be long gone.

That was the exact moment our plan fell apart.

An urgent beep came from our nav-computer, signifying a proximity alert. It wasn’t the police either – it was an armed warship, ten seconds away in Eftiel. What the hell? “Jen?” I hollered, looking over my shoulder. Silence. He was nowhere to be seen.

Biting down on the panic rising in my chest, I opened all my eyes fully – taking in everything around me. Jen had run towards his “kid”. My own young were huddled together on the floor to my left and the Captain...the Captain was nowhere to be found. I gasped. The whole interaction, taking only a few microseconds, left me drained and I was forced to close all but 3 of my eyes. I turned towards the nav-com. The hostiles were getting closer. Sliding towards the control seat, I began to engage the weapon systems.

“Plasma cannons charging; antimatter rifles – out of ammo; annihilation beams critically damaged!” I muttered under my breath as my skin changed to a deep dark blue.

We're so screwed. Closing my eyes, I thought back to when I had brushed aside concerns about the state of our weapon system.

"We'll be fine," I had said. "We'll only be there for a couple hours," I'd rebutted with a smile – now it had come biting me back. We were stuck in deep space with no functioning weapons and our Gods damned Captain missing...

"What a mess," I heard from behind me. It was the Captain, a deep frown on his face, his eyes set in grim determination.

"How long till they charge, Savi?" he asked, looking at the hologram of the plasma cannons – "And Jen!" he yelled. "Leave your God damned kids and go refuel the rifles."

I heard an affirmative "Aye" as I began to check how long we had till the cannons were online – "Two hours, Captain..."

My words trailed as the captain turned around and approached his room.

"Well I'll be," I heard him say. "Didn't think I had to use this so soon..."

* * *

As he quickly ducked into his room to retrieve what I could only guess to be his antique Colt Pocket Model 1849 revolver, lovingly modified with an oxidiser chamber to make it work in vacuum, I cursed whatever inane fork in his evolutionary tree led to the sentimental idiocy of these beings. The Captain was now clearly at his most dangerous; he had a hare-brained scheme. In the meantime, I was going to have to make sure that this marvel of engineering didn't get kerploded by his species' warring factions.

Beep. Beep, Beep. The sound of the progress bar on the display above my station was already getting on my nerves. The plasma cannons were charging, but agonisingly slowly. There was no chance they'd be ready in time. The annihilation beams were nearly torn to shreds in the last fight. Then our last chance was the antimatter rifles. Those just needed some rounds put into them. I'm sure we had some of those left. Hardware was normally Jen's job but maybe I could -

"Where the fuck is Jen?!" I muttered. As much as he was an annoyance, that man knew this ship almost as well as I did. It never took him this long to just move rounds from one rack to another. Just as I was about to shout for him, that funny feeling of space falling apart took hold, and the light disappeared. I paused to sense the ripple of darkness as my skin adapted to the sun-shades zipping open, leav-

ing me staring up at The Federation's colours on the bilge of one of their behemoths. We were out of time, and I was alone on the bridge. "Well, fuck."

Another irritating beep started up, discordant alongside the sound of the progress bar. They were trying to make contact. That was either extremely good or extremely bad, no, probably just extremely bad; or to borrow a human expression, we were up shit's creek without a paddle and I didn't know how to swim. The captain was out of sight, and the Federation wasn't backing off – as if they would back off from such a clearly vulnerable ship. It was only a matter of time before they got tired of waiting and blew us into smithereens. I stretched out a tentacle and responded to their hail. The front monitor filled with the image of a hunched over Bal'een stuffed inside a Federation uniform. The Bal'een's single eye zeroed in on me. He blinked once and then sneered in the self-satisfied way I had come to associate with Jen when he won a round of poker.

"What do you want?" I snapped. If anything, the Bal'een's expression softened in response.

"You-" he savoured his words "-are in restricted space."

"So are you." Beep. Beep. Three quarters full; they needed more time. "What about it?"

He pressed a few buttons on the console in front of him, faint beeps coming through the crackling audio feed. "We have weapons locked on you. We have shields. We have a full crew."

"Yeah, and I have a signed copy of *Avan Terro's Wave formations in Sub-Space* and you don't hear me bragging about it."

The floor shook. I heard a deep thump. A grinding vibration, another thump.

He sneered wider. "And now we're inside," he laughed. The screen went black. They'd boarded. I flew to the screens: There they were. Two dozen of them, crammed bulging into warsuits, on the gundeck. Jen was crouched around the corner, shaking on the camera relay. I buzzed through to his implant.

"Jen, they're in there with you, around the corner. Try and get out, but leave the rifles for now. I don't think they're here to talk."

I saw him react on-screen, too fear-frozen to respond. He crawled toward the door, as the Bal'een phalanx rounded the corner. He got up, started running, but it was no good, not against their motorised warsuits. They swarmed him, and when he emerged, one of them had its charred steel claw around his throat, holding him three feet from the

floor. I heard them through the implant, in the hissing half-language of decay and waste.

“Where is your master, wretch?”

Jen had his hands up in protest, or prayer.

“You won’t tell us?”

They moved in closer around him. He sobbed silent as the air left his body.

“Very well... you have made your choice. You won’t rot in the vacuum.”

A silver flash too fast to make out, then he swung in the air. A wicked metal spine jutted from his chest. Ripped out just as fast. I heard him sputtering over the intercom, saw him hit the floor, saw the blood pool around him.

I saw then, in the corner of the screen, the warheads; he'd been interrupted in his task, and the cannon's safeguard enclosure hadn't been closed around the magazine.

He saw them too.

“Hit the switch,” he cried, blood-soaked and hopeless. *“I’ll die here anyway, make it count, please.”*

The Bal’een ignored his broken body on the floor, moved toward deck.

“There’s no time – no other way.” The voice grew fainter. *“Please, look after my boy, love him for me?”*

I gripped the firing switch. *“I will. You won’t die for nothing. Goodbye, brother.”*

Slammed it down. The cannon's firing-pin smashed down on the exposed warhead. The magazine flashed furious red. The screen went white, then black.

They’d be vaporised, along with our starboard, but now we were in deep space, down at least one engine, our best man, my best friend, and our air-lock.

* * *

Several new beeping noises had started now, including a siren noise that presumably had something to do with how I’d just blown up half the ship. I pored over the remaining screens, not really registering what they showed, but thinking more about how weak my knees were.

The ship’s coordinates were whirring haywire as the force of the explosion propelled us away – away from our starboard half, away from where Jen will forever be, even now scattering into atoms and intermingling with the atoms of his Bal’een killers.

Where was the Captain? I scoured the screen for a blur of his spacesuit, for his silly human gun. What if he had headed towards the starboard airlock too when he saw

the Bal’eens on his screens? No sign of the Captain on my screens. But also no more Bal’eens on board. I switched the screens to display our external sensors. I toggled the switch to view starboard for about seven times, before I remembered with a jolt that we no longer had starboard sensors – I’d vaporised them.

The other sensors showed that we were coming up really close to the ark ship now. So close that their shields were messing with our pressure readings. Sure enough, our ship was no longer going straight ahead but veering off towards port, as our velocity from the explosion propelled us towards the ark ship but its shield pushed us back out.

– Hang on.

This ark ship is an abandoned wreck. Why does it have functioning shields?

All the scans and calculations Jen and I had performed throughout this trip suggested that the ark ship was falling apart. No signs of life, no signals of any kind radiating out. The ship was in such a state that, if it had any shields, they would have crumbled upon any minor impact, not nearly enough to hold off a plummeting Traverser 560, let alone one riding on a plasma cannon blast.

The Federation ship hovered at the edge of my port sensor. I was stuck between an ark ship with inexplicable functioning shields and some Bal’eens who would blow me into smithereens. I thought about my larvae hatchlings. Jen’s ‘child’. Jen lying in his pool of blood. So this is how it ends?

* * *

Suddenly a static sound shrilled and popped on the ship’s intercom. A voice spoke in what sounded like Common Tangurian. The signal quality was bad, but I could make out the multi-laryngeal consonants that only Tangurian had. I looked at the screens and saw that we were beelining for the ark ship again: the shields had been let down to let us through.

The voice was now speaking in a different, vowel-y language I didn’t recognise.

And then, with a lilting accent:

“Vortex Traverser 560. Craft condition: critical. Detected life-forms on board: five. Craft will dock at Airlock 4. All life-forms on board must remain seated, and not attempt to leave the craft. Permission to leave the craft will be granted after docking, once our personnel have performed necessary safety checks.”

“Message acknowledged, this is Vortex 560! I am engineer Savi, our captain is presumed dead. Will endeavour to comply, however our manoeuvrability was compromised

in repelling boarders.”

“Noted Vortex 560, we will prepare a tractor beam. You are being re-routed to ventral hangar bay two. Brace for EM shock in 30 seconds.”

A mental countdown ticking, I coaxed as much output as I dared from the manoeuvring thrusters. Up close now, the rocky bulk of the arc was studded with artificial structures – sensor bundles, turrets and boxy protrusions of ...

Turrets? Yes! A great battery of them, triplets of guns in angular mountings all along the broadside of the arc! Even now they were swivelling to acquire the Bal’een ship. I studied the guns, not recognising their long barrelled silhouettes. What could they be?

The countdown in my head reached zero. There was a flash of electrical discharge around the guns and our cockpit rocked. Sparks jumped from the consoles around me as I struggled to stay at the controls.

Ah, railguns. Of course.

Using the rear sensors, I could see the Bal’eens had tried to turn bow on into the storm, belatedly awakening to their peril. It was insufficient however, the volley of kinetic projectiles raking across their bow and tearing an ugly rent in the hull.

The Bal’een ship began to list, venting atmosphere and debris, sending their return fire wild. The ark’s guns compensated for this movement however, and another salvo of hyper-fast solid projectiles slammed into them.

Then they were gone, possibly literally, but also from my scanners. The tractor beam had carried us in under the arc and into the hangar.

I docked at the nearest empty station in the hangar, making the most of the manoeuvrability my ship had left – and it really was my ship now, with Jen atomised and the captain presumably dead somewhere else in the ship. Ship stable for now, I gathered my own young into my brood-pouch, and went in search of Jen’s orphaned hatchling.

I found the captain before I found the hatchling – it seemed that he had taken a couple of Bal’eens down with him. I gave him the hasty last rites of my own kind, the best I could do, and continued to Jen’s quarters.

His hatchling was sitting on his bunk, quiet for once, and it looked up and babbled meaningless sounds as I tentatively approached it. I had always thought it worryingly helpless and underdeveloped, barely more advanced than my own larval young, which could at least retreat to the safety of my brood-pouch when necessary – it tottered around helplessly and could barely string a sentence together, for all that Jen had insisted it was ‘advanced for its

age’.

Usually I avoided it as far as possible, since it constantly leaked fluids whose acidity felt unpleasant on my surfaces, but I had promised Jen I would care for it, and it is terribly bad luck to break a promise made to a dying being. Gingerly, I curled a limb around the hatchling, and it settled in against my side cheerfully enough – hopefully its undeveloped state would prevent it from being overly distressed at the loss of its main caretaker.

The intercom came on. “Engineer Savi, present yourself at the airlock with your companions. Be aware that you are heavily outnumbered and that we can obliterate your ship at will, but are willing to moderate our treatment of you in line with your behaviour and compliance.”

“Message acknowledged. Kindly grant me two tenmins to make my way to the airlock.”

“Granted.”

Shifting the human hatchling against my side again, I made my way down, leaving my neu-gun on the prep station. The airlock was still functional – a near-miracle – and I engaged the override to release it.

I don’t know what I was expecting to see when I’d finally managed to haul the door open enough to fit the disproportionately large head of Jen’s hatchling – child – through. Tangurian military, perhaps, given the language, or a colony of humans marooned on the ship for generations. What I was certainly not expecting was two Bal’eens standing at the end of the ramp they’d pushed up to the doorway.

I froze, instinctively turning to shield the kid with my body, my eyes closing almost to slits with fear.

Immediately, an amplified voice blared in the room. “Engineer Savi, disengage invisibility immediately. Repeat, disengage invisibility. This is your final warning.”

Invisibility? I opened one eye and glanced down at a steely grey tentacle, complete with a shifting pattern of rivets that blended in with the airlock behind me. Of course – the people here must not be used to dealing with Yefthann like myself. The colour change had been involuntary, a built-in fear response to hide from predators. Not that we had many of those left on our homeworld.

My rational thought overrode my instinctual desire for camouflage and I changed my skin to a nice, visible orange. To my relief, the Bal’eens did not seem to react at all. I reminded myself that not all Bal’eens were Federation goons.

“Where are the other three life forms? We detected five.”

As I scooped my hatchlings out of my pouch into view, something nagged at my mind.

“Please proceed down the ramp. The guards will accompany you to the Bridge.”

With little other option, I followed the voice’s instructions. When I drew level with the Bal’eens, they turned and began to walk alongside, shepherding me and the hatchlings – and Jen’s child – via several square corridors to a room full of controls. A figure in a padded chair spun around to face us.

And I realised what had been nagging me about that voice.

It was a voice I’d heard on every broadcast about the rebel Union of Species, the only serious faction opposing the Federation still in existence. The voice of their leader, the Tangurian Gle;eng Ar’uma. I’d followed every news item about the Union: even highly biased accounts were better than nothing. I’d always dreamed of one day being re-

cruited to join their highly selective force. But the Federation weren’t entirely wrong when they referred to this recruitment as ‘abduction’, from what I’d heard.

“I’m assuming I’m never going home?” I asked, already sure of the answer.

Ar’uma nodded, a hint of pity in his eyes. “The freedom of the Universe rests on our secrecy. We cannot allow one to leave who has seen our headquarters. And besides...” A smile touched his leathery face. “We needed an engineer, and from what I’ve heard, you’re one of the best.”

And that’s how I ended up juggling being chief engineer to the Union of Species and single parent to three hatchlings of my own and an adopted human child. It wasn’t easy, at first: Mike is a lot more work than the other three put together. But we made it work, and she grew to love me in her own way. And, perhaps more importantly, she’s growing up to be a fine little engineer. Her father would be proud.

Author Reviews: Ark

A surprising ending to the tale, but a satisfying one. I particularly enjoyed how everyone kept Savi’s alien mannerisms up throughout the story – it’s very satisfying to see that done in chainwriting!—Alex Colesmith

Editor’s Review

This is the only space-based soft sci-fi chain that has been written during my time as Editor, which is somewhat surprising given that 1) we’re the Science Fiction Society and 2) people at meetings seem to spend half their time talking about Star Trek, Babylon 5 and other soft sci-fi TV shows. But this chain certainly makes up for it with high quality. It’s dramatic, sincere and moving, and definitely inspired in places by the best of sci-fi TV.

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

The Cares That Bind Us

Space to Reach

Savi’s Tale

The Carnival of Beasts

Inky Sprite, Kitty Liu, NH, A. Otto, Alex Colesmith, Buck Blake, Chilli, Gwendolen Sellers, CountBobby

CW: Strong language, alcohol, creep-ish behaviour, blood

Dan reached up for the knocker, pulling back the heavy iron ring.

Clonk!

Edward jumped at the sound of iron on wood, shaking the rain from his coat.

For a moment there was silence in the little shelter provided by the high stone gateway. Edward shuffled his feet,

looking around. The last red embers of sunset were fading in the sky, leaving the castle towers insubstantial against the dark clouds. He glanced down to check his phone.

“Look, Dan, let’s just head back to the hostel.”

Dan was leaning back, head resting between two of the dark metal studs in the door.

“Relax, we’re just a bit late. I’ll ask nicely, just for you.”

Something heavy moved inside then, with a creak, the wicket gate in the castle door beside Dan swung inwards. He grinned. "See!"

Inside was a sort of antechamber, with a high arched ceiling, following the shape of the gates. Elaborate tapestries hung from iron bars, but the stone walls behind still showed through the holed and torn fabric.

Dan was approaching the man who had presumably admitted them.

"Hey, dude, the people in the village were saying there's a super party here. My boy..."

Edward couldn't help but stare at the man's face, even as he brushed past Dan, cutting him off, to stand between them. He'd never seen a countenance so sallow and sagging.

"Do not trouble yourself," the butler rasped from between lips only half open, "I will take your coats." He moved to pull their coats off, taking them incautiously in one hand. With his other, he proffered two white objects.

Edward took one, turning it over his hands. It was a stylised rabbit mask: long ears, small black gems framing the eyes and two ribbons of white silk hanging from the edges.

"Hey, they're different!" Dan said. "Which one do you want?"

He was holding up the second mask. It was bone-china white like the first one, but shaped like the face of a wolf. The wolf's tongue lolled out between its fangs (real wolves' fangs surely aren't that big, Edward thought), glinting with studs of red.

Edward looked up for the butler, but he had disappeared.

Tapestries around them were fluttering a little.

Actually, they could feel - very, very faintly - the floor thrumming beneath their feet. 'Staying Alive' by the Bee Gees seemed to be coming from down a stone passageway.

"I guess the party's started," Dan said.

"We should go back to the hostel, you're drunk," Edward protested, but to no avail. Dan was already heading towards the passageway, switching on his phone torch.

The white light scraped wildly across the room for a brief second as Dan adjusted the torch. There was rustling movement above them, like wings. Edward was sure that he could also hear thin rasping voices in the flurry too. "Selfish fuckers, selfish fuckers, selfish fuckers," it sounded like. "You can't even sleep these days sleep these days sleep these days sleep these days..."

Dan, however, seemed not to hear and was marching confidently down the passageway.

* * *

They couldn't take them off. The masks. The grotesque,

lolloping faces that sneered down at them from all directions upon entering the ballroom - which, from a glance at Dan's 'face' beside him, evidently sneered right back from their own countenances too. As Dan gazed longingly at a tray of lurid blue shots, Edward swore that real drool gleamed from between those fangs.

(Was it just him or had they got even bigger...?)

If Dan had noticed, he didn't care. He was too busy downing two at once, before Edward could even think to tell him that they definitely shouldn't drink whatever this messed-up place offered them. The price could be far more than Revelry's ridiculous Whiskybop club night charges.

Edward's turtleneck felt too tight. Everything was too tight. The space between him and that wolf—Dan, he had to reassure himself—and the dragon over there and the writhing worm-head and whatever in *hell* was that... that... Edward stepped backwards, only for a lady hyena to shriek and kick his load-bearing foot out from its position on her toes. The world turned sideways.

Fuck -

His landing was controlled but slimy. Something wet, prehensile and bright purple had wrapped itself around his limbs, stabilising his fall into a low dip. And then it spoke:

"People don't usually fall for me, you know..."

The voice somehow managed to be sepulchral yet coy. Like two gravestones inscribed with 'Dead is the new sexy' and 'Find me in hell, bestie' scraping against each other in a very Instagrammable mausoleum. Edward lifted his eyes to thank his rescuer and found himself looking up into a face wearing one of the indescribable masks. If it could be called a face. Innumerable long, purple tentacles cascaded from a gleaming bulbous head. The skin of the head was the same lurid purple as the tentacles with sheens of different colours playing over it like an oil slick. The tentacles began roughly where a mouth should have been, a few inches beneath two enormous slanting eyes rimmed with purple rhinestones. The eyes reflected no light at all. They did not shine or glint. They did not have a colour. They could not even be called black really. They were the absence of... anything. They were two almond-shaped scoops of void set into an outrageously purple face. The contrast made Edward's stomach resume its interrupted downward trajectory without him.

He could not look away from those eyes as the tentacles gently set him upright again. Edward could barely feel his body being moved. A wolf howled somewhere far away. The depths of the eyes seemed to expand and draw him into them. He could distantly hear muffled sounds from the world around him but none of it reached his senses. He felt his mouth open. He was falling. He was going mad. What unspeakable horrors lurked in those empty depths? He drew a breath to scream his terror.

"Cathy!" came a sharp cry. Edward stumbled as the tentacles released him and the purple face before him turned, breaking contact with those empty pits.

Edward heaved a few gasps as his breath returned and the sounds and smells of his surroundings came crashing into him.

Cathy flicked her tentacles in agitation and brought up human-looking arms to rest akimbo on her hips. Edward finally saw the rest of her. From the neck down, she appeared to be a human woman decked out a sleek black evening dress and strappy high heeled sandals. Her exposed flesh was perhaps a little too pale and had a sickly greenish hue, but maybe that was a trick of the lighting.

Striding toward them was a crocodile-headed figure in a close-fitting champagne coloured mini dress.

Edward resisted the urge to jump – he never normally jumped; where had that come from? – and instead seized the chance to back away from Cathy’s grotesque embrace.

“Becky!” Cathy warbled. “Look at this *darling* little morsel I found. *So* precious!” Her arm snaked around him, elbow abnormally flexible. “Oh, I could just eat him up.” She pinched Edward’s cheek lightly.

“Mmm, yes,” Becky agreed. Her voice was rough and gravelly, as if she smoked twenty a day and gargled with whisky. “Would you like that, little bunny? The two of us to yourself?”

He could feel his legs trembling, fighting to kick out and flee. His eyes rolled in their sockets, looking for a way out; his heartbeat fluttered in his chest.

“N-n-no,” he stuttered. “I’ve... got someone else to meet... I’m going to be late!”

“I’m sure they’ll wait, honey.” Becky’s eyes were green – proper, deep green, shimmering and reflecting the light. Her slit pupils narrowed. “You’re ours for now. Your other friend wouldn’t mind us borrowing you for a bit.”

A long, elegant arm reached over Edward’s shoulder and pushed Cathy away; she hissed angrily, flaring out her tentacles. Becky pouted (as much as a crocodile can).

“Come now, ladies.” The voice was a man’s, elegant and refined. Edward glanced around at his unexpected saviour to see a tall, alarmingly skinny figure in a suit and cape. The bat mask obscuring his face was nightmarish, with long ears and sharp, pointed teeth that glinted just a little too much for Edward’s liking – but they were preferable to Becky’s yellowed, deadly ranks or to whatever horrors lurked inside Cathy’s ring of tentacles. “Mr O’Hare is a guest here, and under my protection.”

“You’re no fun, Drake.” Cathy hissed again, then drifted away with a swirl of ink-black lace obscuring her figure. Becky snorted, annoyed.

“Whose is he? Yours?”

“No, my dear. He belongs to Wulfdan.”

Edward ducked away, pushing through the folds of Drake’s cloak and getting behind the bat man. How had he known Dan’s full name? Dan never used it – he hated it.

Becky paused for a moment, then let out a short, sharp laugh. “This scrawny little thing? I thought Wulfdan would get something a little more... special.”

“And I’d agree if I was in your place, but the choosing is not for you, so— *Hands. Off.*” Drake flung a protective arm around Edward’s shoulders (taking him onto his tip-toes) then led him away.

“Sorry about that, my dear boy,” said Drake, casting his eyes about the room as they moved through the crowd. “The guests here are my very old friends, and I love them dearly, but they’re not... how to put this... they’re not particularly well-adjusted. Events like these, they often get a little tense.”

“Uhh, yeah. They didn’t seem to like me too much. Or they *did* like me too much. What kind of event is this, exactly?”

Drake paused, and Edward imagined his eyebrows furrowing beneath his mask. “It’s a... coming of age ceremony. A bit like a birthday.”

“A birthday? Does that mean there’s a cake?” Dan had appeared out of nowhere, a glass of something purple in hand. “I could *ravage* a cake right now.”

If Drake was surprised by Dan’s sudden appearance, he didn’t show it. “Yes, there is indeed a cake, of sorts. Please, Mr Wulfdan, if you’ll follow me.”

“Just call me Dan,” said Dan as he fell into step beside Edward. “Hey, this place is pretty wild huh?”

Edward couldn’t believe it. “How do they know your name? You never use your full name!”

Dan looked thoughtful for a moment, then turned to Drake. “Yeah, how do you know my name?”

Drake ignored the question, stopping them in front of one of the many small drinks tables. This one, however, only held two drinks. Both were a deep, delicious crimson. “Now, Mr Wulfdan, Mr Edward, if you’ll kindly accept these drinks as a token of our hospitality, we can get on with the evening. And get you some cake, Mr Wulfdan.” He held up the glasses, offering one to each of them.

“*More* free booze? Aww hell yeah!” Dan took the glass, any trace of suspicion or confusion vanishing from his voice.

Edward made no move to take his. “I think maybe it’s time we headed back, Dan. You’ve gotten your drinks, we’ve... ah... socialised with the guests. I think it’s time we were off?”

“When did you get so boring?” Dan took Edward’s glass from Drake and held it out to Edward. “Come on. Just one more drink, ok? I’ll get a slice of cake and then we can head back.”

Edward hesitated. Dan held his gaze. Those teeth seemed somehow even longer now, as if the mask was snarling. But Dan’s eyes were his, and they were pleading. “Fine, one drink, ok? And then we *go*.”

“Deal.” Dan lifted his mask to down his drink as Edward took his own and sipped.

It wasn't wine. It was thick, and slick, and honey-sweet. It danced across his tongue and slithered down his throat, warm and soothing and *delicious*, and before he knew it he was laughing with delight. He turned to Dan, who was laughing too. He'd replaced his mask, which seemed so lifelike now that Edward could swear he could make out individual hairs. Edward turned to Drake. “Wow, what was that stuff? Where do I get another glass?”

“Ha-HA, I *knew* you'd agree to stay eventually!” Dan's eyes twinkled from behind the mask, triumphant. “Now, about that cake...” Or was that twinkle... hunger?

A shiver shot down Edward's spine. Dan's eyes were locked intently with his. That really *did* look like saliva on those fangs. “Ed, did I tell you? You look absolutely lovely tonight. *Mouth-wateringly* lovely. I mean it.”

“Um, Dan?”

“What, Ed?”

“Can you... stop doing that?”

“What? What am I doing?”

“Your hand. You're hurting my arm.”

Dan had stepped forward, his hand brought up to grip Edward's upper arm. Gently, at first, but his grip had tightened. Dan looked down at his hand, confusion briefly registering in his eyes before his gaze returned to Edward's again. His grip didn't loosen.

“Why? You aren't going to go anywhere, are you? I haven't even had my cake yet. You *said* I could get some before we leave.”

“Dan, you're scaring me. I think it's time to go. I'm sorry about the cake.” He tried to pull free, but Dan's grip was tight. “Dan, you're really scaring me! Let go!” When Dan didn't, Edward shook harder, then used his free hand to force Dan's away. Dan stumbled back, dazed, then righted himself, and narrowed his eyes. Those eyes, so hungry. The mask's mouth gleamed red, and white.

“I really mean it, Edward. I could just... I could just eat you up right now.” The laughter Edward had felt had after his drink was replaced now with a cold, choking sensation in his stomach. Dan cocked his head, looking at him quizzically. And then he lunged.

Edward barely avoided him, staggering backwards into another small drinks table. His feet came out from under him and he was on the ground, thick red liquid splashing all over his clothes, his face. It was the same warm sweetness, but cloyingly so, drowning out everything else. No, that wasn't just the drink. The lights had gone out, and laughter filled the room, from all around, suffocating him. An animal snarl from Dan's direction. Then shrieks of joy, and Drake's voice, refined as always: “Let the hunt begin!”

The words filled him with dread, and with adrenaline. Edward scrambled backwards, hoping that he was moving to

safety, rather than into the hands of one of those creatures - not all creatures, Edward had to remind himself, Dan was there too. Desperately trying to regain his footing, Edward's eyes adjusted to the lack of light just enough to make out a vaguely humanoid shape, moving towards him at an alarming rate.

Rolling to the side, Edward heard a crash beside him, a clattering as something sharp hit his side, the hissing of snakes, the curses of a woman in what sounded vaguely Greek - Edward's esoteric choice of A-level finally seeing some use. Reaching down, he barely had a moment to gather that it was some sort of curved fang before hoofbeats reminded him of the danger.

Finally managing to rise, he sprinted in a random direction, hoping beyond hope that he'd chosen the path to the exit. Footfalls and cackles of all sorts resounded through the large chamber, Drake's voice ringing above them all, like an adult reprimanding overly excitable children, “Remember, the boy belongs to Wulfdan! Catch and release is in effect!”

Catch and release? Edward thought indignantly, the fang still warm in his hand. Bursting through a wooden door, he came into a much smaller, cramped chamber, just barely pulling himself up short of the altar, his head almost hitting the stone base. Around him, he saw words, in some unrecognisable script, looping around the room, written sloppily in some runny red substance that he feebly hoped was just drinks from a prior party.

Each stone brick that comprised the walls and floors of the chamber was carefully placed—in a stable lattice that was as impenetrable as it was inescapable. There were no further doors from this chamber: in his attempted flight, Edward had cornered himself into his own tomb. Served himself up on a veritable platter, to be killed by his own boyfriend. A harsh howl rang out from the other side of the rotting door. Guttural, almost strained—the sound ripping itself out of a vessel not fit to contain it. The door wouldn't hold against a wolf - Edward knew this like it was some intrinsic force of nature. But the noise was close enough that there was no escape to be had from leaving.

Next to the door hung a wooden security bar, bolted tightly into a divot in the harsh stonework. He scrambled to slam it down—any extra time was worth it.

He backed away from the door, swinging around desperately for any way out. His senses were in panicked overdrive, every touch, colour and sound more acute. The voices in the walls were back, audible once more now he was free of the crowds and booming music of the party—the same whispers as before, but they were so, so much louder now.

And another one joins their insufferable flock flock flock -

Will we never know peace in this place...

*There's no rest in these halls
halls halls*

Why on earth do they always

feel the need to run? Those predators love a good hunt...

Voices bickering, tumbling over one another, sentences fusing together in an incessant, incomprehensible haze of noise. Edward covered his ears - desperately attempting to shut them out.

Stop making a victim out of yourself. You cotton-tailed coward.

They always pick the weakest for the rabbit. Rabbit. Rabbit.

Got to make sure the first meal goes smoothly I suppose, suppose suppose.

Rabbit. Rabbit. Rabbit...

He touched the cold ceramic mask sealing his face.

A great weight slammed against the door, throwing Edward forward. The barricade held. Barely. Inhuman snarls reverberated around the small chamber.

Edward looked towards the altar.

It was stupid, real fucking stupid.

He got up. Taking a few steps forward; another slam against the door, the sound of wood straining. There was no more *time*. He positioned himself over the altar - securing his arms on either side. His ears twitched, his body tensed, instincts begging him to run, freeze still, hide- anything but this.

Do it.

Edward scrunched his eyes shut and slammed his face down onto the altar. There was a slight crack, but not enough. So he slammed down again- and again *and again*.

Shattering porcelain and splintering wood harmonised in a horrifying symphony as both door and mask met their ends.

It had been a stupid, self-destructive idea spurred on by voices he did not know whether to trust, but sure enough, the pieces of porcelain fell freely from Edward's face, mask shattered and pieces strewn across the harsh stone of the altar. In a daze he stumbled back, head pounding heavily, blood trickling down his forehead but mind infinitely clearer. With his head free of the god-forsaken mask, he could finally think, finally feel like himself, his instincts back in control as his own. Senses back in his own *human* body.

He turned, blood-smeared and panting, to face the caved-in doorway. He locked eyes with Dan, who stood stock still. His would-be prey now lay in tatters on the altar.

Edward blinked twice, slowly, like he was beckoning a cat towards him. Trying to place Dan at ease, trying to remind him what they once were. *Lovers*. The word love is supposed to mean something, even at the most basic level of animal instinct, lovers stick together. But love couldn't be further from Edward's reality. His face battered and bruised, staring up at Dan's cold snarling ceramic visage.

"Dan, you've got to take it off, it gets inside you, it changes how you think..."

There was no response. Dan crept closer towards Edward, in a manner that can only be described as eerily off-putting. Dan's snarls echoed through the room, striking fear through every bone in Edward's body.

It was then that Edward had an idea. Grabbing the heavy ceramic rabbit ears from the mess left on the altar, he clutched one in each fist and patiently waited for Dan to approach.

The room felt darker somehow; what little dregs of moonlight had crept in through the thin windows had disappeared, swallowed by the dark unwelcoming space. The walls of the room shook with the violence and frantic energy of the hunt, but Edward tried to stay calm. He needed to free Dan.

Dan had his eyes on only one thing: Edward. His pace quickened, turning into a leap as he reached the altar. He grabbed Edward. His cold palms gripped tightly on to Edward's exposed arms. In a moment of struggle, Edward hoisted the ceramic ears above his head and wriggled himself free of Dan's grip.

"Dan, what are you doing? Let me get the mask off you."

"Don't think it's that easy," snarled Dan, ducking away as Edward brought the ears down towards Dan's head. But Edward was quick. He grabbed Dan from behind and held him in a headlock. Then, using all the strength left in his arms to do so, he began to smash at the hideous wolf mask with the large ears.

Crash. Bang. Thud.

The shattered mask lay on the floor, finally, and Edward breathed a sigh of relief at seeing Dan's face once again. Upon seeing Dan's soft, brown eyes again, Edward fell into his arms, feeling the warmth and reassurance that Dan was back. They could get out of here now, as far away as they could. Edward leaned into a deep embrace. Looking up into Dan's face, he noticed Dan was grinning. Not only grinning, but he was baring his huge white teeth. Something was wrong. His teeth were getting longer, bigger. His canines began to morph slowly into huge, long fangs. Edward began to panic. Dan tightened his embrace, and began to laugh, his fangs still growing.

"Darling Edward, you forget, I could just eat you up..."

As Edward began to squeal in discomfort, Dan sank his fangs deep into Edward's neck. A piercing pain awoke every nerve in Edward's body. He screamed. Dan laughed. Then the room fell into silence and darkness once more.

Fin



—Lily Mansfield

Darkly funny in places – revelry, for example, or the names – and tragic in others. I really thought for a moment that Edward would be able to win his boyfriend back, but this is no Tam Linn tale—Alex Colesmith

Editor's Review

I hadn't thought of the overlap between SFF and gothic horror, but it seems that the idea must have been telepathically broadcast around Cambridge at some point, because CountBobby and Inky Sprite both independently suggested some kind of horror chain. And what a success! The concept of masks that aren't quite masks is very interesting and makes for some very creepy scenes. I also liked the scene where Cathy and Becky are being total creeps—it's just as horrifying as any other threat Edward faces.

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

Hungry Like The Wolf

These People You Call Friends: Part 1

Chris Pang

CW: Strong language, police violence

I first realised that something was up with Heinz when he casually told me on a freezing winter evening that his favourite gif ever was from a movie that didn't exist.

@heinz_sketch#1011: no u don't understand its been like two straight hours of buildup about whether he's gonna use the gun

Cause like his mother died bc of that gun

and he took it off her dying body

and then he pulls out the ppk and I literally start crying lol

The gif, of course, did exist: a grainy shot of a man's hand dramatically removing a Walther PPK from a leather jacket pocket, overlaid with big white block capitals saying "It's time." It lasted little more than half a second, and looped in a way that could be considered highly satisfying, if you were fourteen and obsessed with the liberatory power of a pistol. But the scene itself had been manufactured, created when the internet decided it would be funny to create a Woody Allen movie from the 70s that was never made. The clip itself had been stitched together from four low-resolution stills created by an image generation network, then animated through a smart interpolation process used for video game enhancement, to reduce the number of frames per second a game engine needed to render. As a result the hand jerked unnaturally when you looked closely and, for a few frames near the end, seemed to begin to slide the gun back into the pocket. The Verge wrote an entire story about it back in 2025.

In many contexts the citing of this gif and the hypothetical

movie it was from would have been acceptable. Funny, even, if he meant it as a sort of alternate-reality joke. But Heinz was a film buff. We'd met on a Freetalk server for amateur "no-AI" filmmakers based in London, discussed the finer aspects of shot composition and colour grading over long voice calls, sent each other one-minute shorts of our works in progress, and bonded over a shared quasi-addiction to coffee. He was serious about movies and serious about shooting them. Not to mention we'd just spent twenty minutes discussing the spinning top gif from *Inception*.

@beheded_#2182: lol wut

@heinz_sketch#1011: ???

@beheded_#2182: dude stop fucking with me

@heinz_sketch#1011: .

@heinz_sketch#1011: ur weird man

@beheded_#2182: you know the movie was made up

@heinz_sketch#1011: i think i would know if my favourite movie was some kind of reddit prank I literally just watched it last month because i was in a low mood

For the next five minutes, I tried my best to figure out if, against all odds, the internet had somehow ponied up the money to shoot or generate a full feature-length version of *Nobody Rides Twice*, good enough to fool someone into thinking it was actually a commercial release. There had been efforts of a similar length and quality before, notably the complete re-edit of *The Revenge of the Sith* to make it

fit the doubly-translated travesty subtitle track known as *The Backstroke of the West*, parts of which required someone with an actual budget renting out some cloud compute to generate new close up shots from scratch. But, to the best of my knowledge, if this video ever existed it was some obscure torrent that was quickly taken offline. Certainly not mainstream enough for someone to mistake it for a real film from the 70s.

@beheded_#2182: *Ok, when did you find this film*

@heinz_sketch#1011: *2023*

It was my 20th birthday and my college slam got me a blu ray as a gag gift

@beheded_#2182: *blu ray??????*

For a long moment after hitting the return key I stared at the screen. Later I realised that it couldn't have been longer than thirty seconds, really, since my phone alarm for bedtime was set to go off shortly afterwards and Heinz replied quite quickly. But sometimes between sending a message and receiving a reply there is an infinity of pain, and sometimes you feel like you've just been thrown from your seat onto the floor, and I was feeling both of those feelings at once.

@heinz_sketch#1011: *ye blu ray. lemme find the case*

Sure enough, he sent me a picture of a DVD case with the meme logo they'd generated for the movie printed on it, a close up of Woody Allen scowling against a desert backdrop, and all the usual signage. Yet even that could have been excused as some very elaborate and very detailed prank that had started two years early, if it weren't for the sunlight streaming onto the bed in the background of the picture. It was 10pm.

@beheded_#2182: *when did you take the picture*

@heinz_sketch#1011: *like 3 secs ago?? Wdym*

At that point my phone started blasting the nightcore remix of the *Paranoia Agent* opening theme and I decided to go to bed.

* * *

Somewhere in the distance bells were ringing. Over and over, the clanging merged with the acoustic sound of Taylor Swift being covered by three singing guys who told me at the start of the video that they were in Mexico City.

I've never liked online socialising. To be sure, I did a lot of it, but that was because I stammered if I was talking to

anyone I was remotely interested in and became recklessly overconfident otherwise. I was often made and broken by the bottle over the course of a single evening and my messaging frequencies with people I saw in the flesh often featured sudden and calamitous dropoffs from which they never recovered, save for some unnatural and pitiful stabs toward reconciliation. Still, when the chatbots and "vfriends" began to proliferate something told me to avoid them and, whether out of some stubborn sense of dignity or acknowledgement of the cloying desperation of the entire charade, I stuck to trying (and failing) to connect with other humans. And if the humans at uni weren't receptive, then online humans would have to act as substitutes.

The bells had stopped. It was 4pm and I needed to sign on to my laptop. The event was starting soon.

There is a certain way people join voice calls. Sam, for example, was already there and waiting, the first of us to show up. Jane would join about 3 minutes before the event, then just as rapidly disconnect to switch wifi networks, readjust her microphone, or just grab a glass of water. The rest of us poured in on the dot, or shortly after. There was a certain ritual to pulling up your snacks, waiting for your kettle to stop rumbling, then rolling in for a long evening of shooting the shit at nothing in particular.

Sam: "Man, it's fucking freezing where I am—one second—Mom, I'm talking—Talking! I told you about this—be right back." (Sam muted their microphone)

Jane: "Evidently the conclusion we should draw from this is that talking about the weather attracts the attention of everyone over forty years old in the nearby vicinity."

Shing: "Are you suggesting that the only people who talk about the weather are old people?"

Jane: "No, I'm suggesting that interest in the weather grows exponentially with age. ANYWAYS, wanna hear about the restoration?"

Me: "Wait, what's the restoration?"

Shing: "Dude it's been like, what, three weeks now?"

Me: "Well, I haven't heard about—"

Jane: "Hold on, I'll start streaming—just gotta get my phone—"

After a moment, we could all see a low-light, slightly shaky video feed of what looked like an electric guitar. Two carbon-fibre shells spray-painted red formed a triangular base, clamping onto a metal spine that showed a mess of cables, screens, and what looked like a row of metal prongs at the bottom.

Me: "What the fuck is that?"

Jane: "A Mitsuya Raika 702. Picked it up after a strike-

breaking attempt, been trying to rewire it to bypass all that crappy IoT control software. It's basically an electric guitar shaped taser." Some part of my brain, the useless part that was actually good at my degree, muttered quietly: *those police should've used something open source then, eh?*

Shing: "It also, admittedly, looks sick as hell."

Jane: "Not when you see it being basically used as a bludgeon and a crowd control cattle prod against your friends. Some of the people that got hit... let's just say that in this case "nonlethal" is more of a technical definition than a product description."

Me: "Is that legal?"

Jane: "If you're a cop, yeah. Public safety ordinance." A pale arm, swirling with tattooed slogans and a Taylor series expansion entered the video and flicked a few switches. A thin hum began emanating from the spine as the built-in display started to glow, followed shortly by what was unmistakably sparks near the prongs and a wisp of smoke. The phone camera shuddered, then fell onto the carpet as a medley of indecipherable noises came through the microphone. Jane (now sounding distant): "I'm fine, just fried another damn microcontroller."

Such was life in the internet age.

* * *

"— calling at: Victoria station."

The train to central London was late, which suited me, because I was also late. By the time I managed to settle myself it had already reached mid afternoon and the sun also seemed ready to call it a day, casting rays of weak and slanting light through the midst of a loose mixture of industrial agglomeration and featureless greenery.

In many ways, the idea that I lived "in London" was a lie, but it was simply easier and more exciting to say that compared to "some random town a literal train ride away from anything recognisable as a city." Besides, TfL did cover the area, at least until the train line operator suffered a ransomware attack or some other outage and we were reduced to taking replacement bus services, which seemed to be on average about every two months. Still, sitting on the train and metering out my meagre allotment of free wifi, I found that I had already subconsciously called up the tab containing a chat window with Heinz. For a moment, I froze again as I saw that impossible picture. Then I shut my phone off and decided to try and think about other things.

"— Six one zero, one six. See it, say it, sorted."

Other thoughts did not come easily. Over and over, I tried to scrutinise my conversations with the entity I thought was a disaffected twenty-something London filmmaker and coffee aficionado, trying to find any hint of a flaw, any suspicious evasion, any part of the story that didn't line up. I'd seen all the videos of course, purporting to teach you how to spot chatbots or catfishers "in the wild", all the little telltale signs and hallucinations. Was I simply so

stupid that I had somehow been caught up in some wild, automated Nigerian prince scam that after another few months would have led to me signing away my life savings? For a second I tried to imagine what I would do if Heinz suddenly told me he needed urgent medical bills, or money to pay some kind of gambling debt. I didn't like the answer, and I wasn't sure if I hated myself more for being gullible or hated Heinz (whoever— whatever he was) more for tricking me into caring.

Still, I had to clear this up, and if anyone could do it Jane would be the person.

"— take care to remove all your belongings as you exit the train."

She had changed. Her old punk-adjacent leather jacket filled with magic RFID tags and other electronic clutter was gone, replaced by a sedate navy suit jacket that still cut a sharp figure while also hiding the old tattoos on her arms. Her face, too, had been cleaned up, and under a certain light possessed a kind of classical elegance that I always thought was her diametric opposite in aesthetic terms. We hugged briefly under the cavernous station ceiling, dwarfed by advertising for Pringles and a glitched-out departures display.

"So what are you doing nowadays?"

"Oh, you know. Intelligence fund stuff."

"Intelligence fund?"

"A bunch of graduates from my year with CS, physics, basically all the STEM degrees got together to run our own hedge fund with market analysis shit. We're beating the market right now, so we call it an intelligence fund. If we ever lose big I guess we'll call it a stupidity fund." Jane gestured briefly at her professional getup, complete with a light orange cotton scarf. "We're looking for Series C investors right now, and they sent me to do some interviews right before we were going to meet." She chuckled lightly, as if she'd been caught stealing from some hardware store, or littering in the street.

"I mean, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. I'm sure you're doing very well for yourself." *Unlike me with my film studies degree*, I added silently, but somehow she seemed to hear that addendum. Her face flushed as we made our way through piles of slush, waiting to cross the road as the stragglers stumbled out of a nearby Starbucks.

"Look. I know— back at uni— before we met..." She shook her head. "Never mind. Sometimes I wish I did more with my life after getting that damn piece of paper."

"At least you're doing something to take care of yourself right now. And you did so much before you graduated."

"I guess." We'd reached our agreed meeting spot, a sedate cafe that was open until late with decaf coffee and danish pastries. "What's this about you getting phished anyways? You were always pretty savvy with scams."

"This is different."

They had automated kiosks to take our orders at the

counter, gleaming chrome automated coffee machines and one very bored barista checking their phone next to the washrooms. It wasn't long before we sat down.

* * *

Twenty people were sitting in a circle in a church building that was the only available venue on Saturday evenings. I suppose, to any curious onlookers peering in through the stained glass, we must've looked like either a surprisingly young substance abuse support group or a cult. But the conversation was good and dinner was communal, meaning free so long as you knew how to cook and let other people bring the ingredients. I made a mean (meaning cheap and vegetarian) *cacio e pepe*, and could manage even when I needed to serve on average twelve people with each batch. The topic of discussion tonight was that perennial hot-button news issue, "The Philosophy of Technocratic Action".

"So there's several things we can immediately say are completely wrong about this idea of technocracy, which *in extremis* becomes enlightened autocracy, right?" The leader of the group was sharp, charismatic and directed the conversation with a kind of heady control that came from years of debating experience and hardcore mathematics. Every now and then I also felt the urge to slap him.

He also did not leave a pause after the question mark. "So first of all, there's this idea that somehow some small group of experts can predict the needs of a population that now numbers more than 8 billion and decide how to restructure our society for those needs, which is related to the central planning problem, right? We know that's not true because of all the planned economies that have been tried before, and the miserable failures that resulted. And computers today, while they make planning easier, still do not have the capacity to direct economies of that scale due to their high degree of chaos and instability from human factors, not to mention those injected from the increasing degree of climate crisis. Which is why I'm against this idea of technocracy." There was a millisecond of a pause, long enough to draw breath and with it the thought of an objection, and then he was off again, nonchalantly tucking his blond hair behind his ears even as the clip of his voice became almost a continuous stream.

"Then we have this idea of action, right? Any kind of technocratic government becomes fundamentally undemocratic because the selection criteria of governance becomes this arbitrary measure of competence and/or intelligence, right? And for a government to do the right thing, even if it's unpopular, it must by necessity override the popular will, sometimes for a prolonged period – yes?"

Somehow I hadn't noticed my hand going up until it was too late. Eighteen pairs of observing eyes swivelled over, and with them it felt as if the lights in the room swivelled along with them. Heat, a sinking feeling in my gut, sweat, the sudden evaporation of thoughts, all came shortly after.

"Well, um, I would say that, on your point about democracy, at present we're already kind of dealing with these

highly structured forces with billions of dollars trying to subvert our democratic process, right? So if we don't organise and present some kind of structured action, organised around principles of utility rather than profit, aren't we essentially letting the billionaires, well, win?" The words seemed to pour out of my mouth, like an explosion or some kind of uncontrollable leak. He frowned at me, a light and articulate frown, the frown of a teacher losing their patience. For a moment panic clawed at me, then I saw in that frown the annoyance of someone whose planned conversation was being derailed and the words surged out again.

"And, there is like this idea of qualifications being arbitrary, but to push back against that a little, it's clear that there are just some people with more organisational capacity, more capability for action, than others right? And you can say, well some underprivileged groups need people who can represent their needs better, but that's not actually repudiating the idea, right? That just calls for re-adjustment of what the population making decisions looks like, the selection criteria for choosing decision makers, right? And if an expert system can't replace everything a human decision maker does, it can still help look, to use a CS metaphor, like, a few layers down the decision tree right?"

I couldn't tell, were those keen or evasive eyes? The room seemed to fall away and I realised that it didn't matter. It had only been twenty minutes since the discussion group meeting started, but I was already okay with the idea of walking out.

* * *

"...this is weird." It had been twenty minutes since I gave her Heinz's online profile, and Jane had not made a single snarky remark or really any kind of action at all beyond silently sipping her coffee, tapping on her laptop, and motioning for me to be quiet every time I tried to speak. Finally, she swivelled her laptop screen around with a practised flick, as if she were about to present a corporate slide deck. Which, I belatedly realised, was probably exactly what she was doing this afternoon, in some chic venue not too dissimilar to the one in which we were currently chatting.

"Okay, look at this." There was some kind of spreadsheet on the screen, row on row of usernames followed by personal names, emails, and what looked like a string of base64 gibberish. "The Freetalk host that your film server uses got breached about four years ago because of a phishing attack, so a bunch of user information got leaked. Here's your friend Heinz – @heinz_sketch#1011@framespersecond.libchat.io." She swiped to the left, to the very last column. "There's also a geolocation thing that you guys use to verify you're all from London, so here's his primary IP address. Registered in London, so it passes your checks. Right?" I nodded along, for lack of anything else to do.

"Wrong. This IP is from the London-based proxy of a darknet VPN service. He's probably not actually signing in from London."

For a moment, there was a flicker of hope: Maybe the sunlight was because he was some incredibly isolated foreign filmmaker, looking for an “in” with the London scene. Then I realised that being someone who spent the better part of six months making friends online while lying about where they lived was probably not a great mark of one’s character.

“And the pictures?”

Jane clicked her tongue lightly, and her eyes had a distant look, as if the whole thing was some kind of logic puzzle she was trying to reroute in her head. “They don’t trigger any of the basic image generation detectors, but that’s not really much evidence either way. Most image generation networks these days are pretty damn good. I’d need more pictures from him— does he have other socials?”

“Let me think— ” then I remembered, and I let out a thorough groan of disgust.

“What?”

“He told me he didn’t have any, because he deleted them all after he nearly got hacked.” At this, she briefly raised an eyebrow, and I felt a distinct urge to crawl under the table and assume the foetal position.

“He’s an artist in 2030 with no socials. What is he making, home movies for the family?”

“Well— I mean— just look at these!” Scrolling through the chat logs, I picked out a few of his works in progress that he’d shared with me and that hadn’t been delisted yet. Shots of the beach, of quiet streets, short monologues.

“...he’s not a very good filmmaker.” I shrugged. “Still, video’s harder to synthesise than still images. I’ll go through these.”

This time it took about thirty seconds. “Yep, fakes.” She paused on a frame with a licence plate just barely in shot, then advanced the video a few frames at a time. “If you look closely, the last letter on that licence plate morphs from E to 3 over the next three seconds, like it’s some kind of shapeshifting paint. This is definitely generated.”

“What about that whole thing with *Nobody Rides Twice*?”

“Large language models often have trouble telling reality from fiction, especially with so many people faking images and posts about it in the training data.” She paused. “Still, if this is some kind of automated system it’s an impressive one. There’s a brain, the thing you’re chatting to, and then there’s all these image and video generation networks, programs to automate voice calls and other live interactions. Just the budget to pay for all of these services wouldn’t be minimal, whether it’s run locally or on the cloud... That’s it!” She spun around with a violence that almost caused me to take a step back, were I not firmly seated in a faux-leather armchair.

“Huh?”

“Can you get him to send some video or a picture? Anything will do. Once it hits your phone bounce it over immediately.” She began pulling up some sort of website.

After a moment of thought, I decided to take a picture of my half-drained decaf americano. It took about five seconds to get my phone angled correctly, as if nothing had happened, as if I was simply enjoying a relaxing day in central London, as if I still cared about things like how nice my coffee shots looked. I half-closed my eyes when I sent the message — it felt, however insignificantly, like a betrayal of Heinz, which only proved how dumb I was being.

@beheded_#2182: Me when I drink my late afternoon decaf coffee lol

Sure enough, two minutes later a shot of Heinz’s own coffee mug came back.

@heinz_sketch#1011: me when I drink my late afternoon caffeine boost lol

The moment the picture touched her laptop Jane immediately swept it into the website with a single rapid stroke. The screen froze, paused, and became occupied by a loading icon. “Reverse image search,” she said by way of explanation. “If this is being generated with a remote image generation service somewhere and then downloaded by whatever server is running the bot over the internet, it might be exposed to the public and cached, at least for a bit. If the devs are clumsy— which they are, it seems.”

Rlookupme.io results: 1 likely match.

1. [95%] <https://us5x.imgregen-safefhost-hs.com/Z3JlZ2VnYW4=>

The screen showed a complex url that led to what looked like an exact copy of the image I had just received. Except, when I looked closer, it was slightly longer than the version Heinz had posted, and at the very bottom it featured what looked like a black bar with an image ID written in white monospaced text. Heinz had simply cropped out that part of the image.

“Witness the power of safe AI legislation, everyone. Spend five seconds cropping and add a bit of noise to disrupt the watermark on the image itself, and nobody’s the wiser.” Jane seemed unimpressed. “Still, we have it to thank for giving us an image ID. You might want to call a lawyer at this point.”

“I’m sorry?”

She shrugged. “EU SAFEAI registration data is private unless the picture comes from Google or you have some kind of warrant. Any more than this and we’d be hacking, or doing some kind of unauthorised computer use. Right now, you’re the victim. Call GCHQ or get a lawsuit together and you could probably help bring down some Russian

botnet.”

“That doesn’t seem like a very *Jane* thing to say. What happened to...” I gestured vaguely at, I suppose, some spectre of a person I once knew. She shrugged again and looked away, outside the window at the drowsy sight of a city sliding into the darkness.

“If they catch me doing this again, that’s it for my job.”

A City with No Colour

Jago Howard Gannicliffe Westaway, Arshia Katyal, Sarah, IC Ranger, Apple Juice, Anon., A. Otto, Dan Scott

It had, Janeth mused as he stood silent amidst the chatter of the wharf and waited, been a very bad idea. Not that it was his place to correct the designs of the Satrap, of course; that was for the Imperial Court, and the couriers sent to them had not yet returned. But if there was one thing that his training had given him it was the ability to critique something whilst saying nought of it – and it really had been a terrible idea. To involve any *magerie* in a matter of a territorial dispute over land both barren and remote seemed excessive, but to call upon a renegade thaumaturge to repel the Haf-Theti from a strip of the Dwephi that, by every soldier’s account he had heard, would be actively inconvenient to maintain for little or no benefit – *that* more than hinted at malice. Had it been he awakening to find entire regiments of his soldiery labouring under a curse he would, forgiving his lack of strategic expertise, have presumed that it was a prelude to war.

Somewhere along in the crowd, somebody gasped. Necks craned and people peered past each other, leaning precipitously out over the water flowing below as they strained to see what was coming out of the gentle morning mists. He could hear people whispering to each other – stories of the Haf-Theti, of their vicious ceremonial wars and their Velvet Legion of thoughtless sigillite warriors, and stories also of the nature of the curse. The soldiers had been turned into dogs which had fled into the fields and torn them up – no, they had been imprisoned within the prisms of their own jewellery – *actually*, the speaker’s wife’s brother was a scout and had clearly seen them all slowly fade from view like spectres in sunlight, until they were mere insubstantial shadows. Some of the discussions grew quite heated or concerned, and the resultant shifting in the crowd gave him the opportunity to peer unobtrusively over the shoulders of the soldiers of the 6th Provincial Dragoons guarding him and see what was coming along the river.

The greatship churned the water around it, the patterns of the circles on its base twisting and spinning as they pushed it forwards above a great rift in the waves. Above it circled an ambassadorial seal, a great disc of light slowly turning to display the triple periwinkles of Haf-Theti in every direction. It moved remarkably fast given its size and class – the speed Janeth would have expected of a warship. Realising that he was not to have as much time as he had expected, he fixed the Third Sigil of the Seamless Eye in his mind and began the self-hypnosis, feeling

For a moment, the voice coming from that clean and cold face sounded incredibly tired. Then it was over, the face composed itself and she stood up. “I need to prepare for more interviews tomorrow. Keep me updated?”

We hugged again briefly, her face half-shrouded in twilight, outside of the coffee shop. Then she turned, adjusted her scarf once, and was gone.

his conscious thought slowly recede within the inner walls of his psyche. The message sent ahead had mentioned no academicians in the ambassadorial party, giving him reason to hope that his little magic might be sufficient mental defence. And if not – well, it was hardly his fault if the Diplomatic Circle had chosen to place him in position to embarrass himself, though he knew it would not be seen that way.

The working was almost complete by the time the ship pulled alongside the wharf, the public backing away from its shimmering flanks even as they slowed and dimmed. Fighting down a queasy hint of panic filtering in from his upper mind, Janeth continued the self-hypnosis. The Third Sigil was beginning to fade in his view now, to be entirely forgotten as it took full effect. Just a few more seconds...

The gangplank of the vessel was thrown down hastily and a figure appeared at its apex. The Sigil flashed back into full sight and the will to maintain it vanished from Janeth entirely as all of his thoughts were diverted to a careful and scholarly consideration of exactly how much worse it was than he had imagined.

Evidently, Vardon Cetellar’s curse had affected rather more than a few border guards.

Janeth was still leering towards the wharf when he, along with every other person around him, was pushed to kneel by an invisible force. Unable to conjure the energy to self-hypnotise and seek guidance from the Seamless Eye, he felt lost. If his powers wouldn’t help him now, he thought to himself, what good were they? He noticed the temperatures drop well below what they could endure. He recalled the stories his mother told him when he was a child. Seven thousand years ago, this city was brimming with purple flowers and pink sunsets. You could toss a coin into the river and the wharf would celebrate with water fairies. It was on this day, today, all those many years ago that a girl named Hazel Tayhey was born. She was said to have miraculous healing powers. Her tears could restore eyesight and a balm made from her hair could cure any long illnesses. Fearing for her safety, her parents decided to run and hide from the general public. It was during this journey that she was hunted and kidnapped by masked men, with no one lending a single helping hand. This was no longer a city of colour.

Janeth often wondered whether the Haf-Theti and Vardon

Cetellar's curse rose from Hazel Tayhey. Was Hazel this majestic creature standing in front of him forcing him to kneel? Was she here to seek revenge on everyone in this city? Every narcissist who did not think twice to help the orphan being mercilessly used for the city's survival? Janeth did not like to add to the city rumours about the curse, but he always believed that his mother's stories were anything but.

Shivering, he looked up. His eyes met with another who was kneeling beside him. Before he could react, the ground shook beneath him, tearing itself apart. Still kneeling, Janeth fought to find his balance. He needed to do something. Anything.

Today's incident had been by far the worst since he'd been here. Feeling unnervingly helpless, he tried concentrating again. He closed his eyes, calmed his heart beat by breathing in and out and cleared his mind off the earthquake and wild bewilderment around him. He thought of his mother and her night-time stories about Hazel, almost as though she wanted him to know something but couldn't expressly tell him. He focused on the Seamless Eye and thought of the power in one's thoughts. He meditated on the sound of the water in the wharf, not thinking of the seemingly impending doom around him.

And there it was. The Third Sigil. He mustered the strength to fight through the invisible but forceful shackles binding him to the floor and turned towards the wharf. He couldn't believe his eyes. He rubbed them almost ten times to just be sure, but he knew it wasn't a mistake.

Standing in the middle of the river, among the aquatic life, atop a majestic ship, was a woman. It seemed as though she were standing over crying, moving shadows, almost as if she were inflicting pain upon someone and soaking it in as an energy source. His mind jumped to his mother's stories and wondered if she really was Hazel, or some incarnation of Lucifer.

But he could have recognized those eyes anywhere. Eyes he had been longing to see for a year. Eyes that helped him hone his self-hypnotising skills. Eyes he never thought he would ever look into again.

Maya.

Before he had time to consider why she was there, the mass of people around him began to move. Some had toppled over during the earthquake, but now, everyone rose as one. Janeth couldn't do anything but follow their example. The soldiers next to him started marching, pushing him along. Based on their glassy, staring eyes, Janeth knew they weren't marching voluntarily.

He also knew that he had to get to Maya.

While pretending to follow the others, he carefully edged to the side. Luckily, the people around him were stumbling and falling more than walking in straight lines, so he didn't stand out as he made his way to the wharf's edge.

The closer Janeth got to the water, the more difficult it became to move against the flow of people. It felt as if he were wading through a strong current. Even though he

had his mental shields up, the curse was affecting him. The air around him was thick and filled with noise. Janeth's heart was beating fast and his mind wandered back to Maya. What was she doing here? How could it be?

Janeth took one more step, and he was able to see the woman again. He strained his eyes, squinting against the sun, to get a better look at her standing on top of the ship that was now towering just ahead of him. He had no doubt it was Maya, his close childhood friend and the love of his life. Somehow, however, something about her was very wrong.

The ship was so close he could touch it when a voice called out to him.

With a start that nearly toppled a coil of rope and himself into the harbour's water, Janeth found himself turning around to confront Reinart, the leader of the 6th Provincial Dragoons and his sworn protector. Whom Janeth had completely forgotten about in the pandemonium of the Haf-Theti's arrival. It was a very rare occurrence, Janeth realised, that he forgot about his 15-year bond with Reinart, which fortunately provided Reinart with the same protections that Janeth was currently attuned to, including in this case the Third Sigil. Though Reinart was looking a little worse for wear than usual. Janeth had to assume that he wasn't himself much better off.

"Janeth, what's going... Is that Maya?! What is she doing on board the ship, shouldn't she be at the Imperial Palace? I mean, that's why we are here, right?"

Reinart continued speaking, before Janeth could rouse himself from his thoughts that were evoked by hearing Maya's name for the first time in over a year.

"This isn't a routine peace negotiation any more, is it?"

"I fear not. Even without Maya, my gut instinct is telling me that we are woefully underprepared for whatever this has now become." It was unsurprising to Janeth that mentioning Maya still achingly tugged at his heartstrings.

Reinart, realising that Maya's arrival was tearing open old wounds for his friend, quickly tried to steer the conversation back to the task at hand. "Our best hope is to get on board that ship, speak with Maya and do our best to neutralise whatever spell, or curse, is holding everyone in its thrall."

"You sure speaking to Maya is a good idea?" As usual with Maya, everything Janeth could think about when her name was mentioned was how she had looked with her bronze eyes on fire and skin as smooth as silk as they lay together in her chambers at the Imperial Court.

"Do you have any better ones?" was Reinart's only reply.

"Have you noticed that we haven't seen a single Haf-Theti on board that ship? The only living soul we have seen so far is Maya."

Come to think of it, Reinart realised that he had indeed not seen anyone else on board the ship since it had emerged from the early morning mists. "Well, that should make it all the easier to sneak onboard without being

seen.”

A short time later and lots of careful inspection by both Janeth and Reinart revealed that they should both be able to use the quay and the decorative woodwork on the Haf-Theti ship to angle around the boat’s hull to the opposite side, where hopefully a well-placed grappling hook would help them scale up to the main deck of the boat.

* * *

Maya was not so pleased. In fact, she was relatively pissed off. She whirled on her heels and snapped angrily at the woman behind her.

“Hazel!” she said sharply, her footsteps sending loud echoes around the boat. “What in Theti’s name are we doing here?”

She paused, glowering at the woman in front of her, whose likeness was that of a little child. She opened her mouth to shout again.

Hazel turned to look at her – she turned, and stared.

Her bright blonde hair glowed with a mystical power and her eyes, the lightest of blue, shimmered in the dim corridor they found themselves in. Maya shivered.

“Soon.”

With a single word Maya’s rage was doused but, like a cat dragged to bathe, her anger was not yet soothed. She snapped her fingers as she strode out of the presence of Hazel and the mighty vessel beneath her began to move – slowly yes, but move nonetheless. Arriving at the deck of the ship, she spread her arms wide and channelled the energy within her. With a glow encasing her fragile form, a single word was sent to the air, towards the city before her – ‘KNEEL’.

The ground crumbled and many perished as they were subjected to a power beyond human comprehension. Taking a deep breath, she raised her arms even higher, her eyes open – glowing with a red burning fervour, another word escaped her lips.

“COME”.

And come they did: stumbling and slow, the mass of people ambled towards the ship. The work done, Maya lowered her arms, peering into the crowd with a look of pity and glee.

“Soon...soon...the imperial palace awaits,” she muttered under her breath. Catching a glance of a very well dressed duo trying to sneak towards the ship she quickly swore, plans formulating in her mind.

* * *

In the dimly lit ship, Hazel lay in the same position Maya left her in – uttering the same words over and over and over again.

Soon.

She drew into herself and started to braid a thin strand of hair at the front of her head. It was a nervous tic, one she

hadn’t managed to get rid of since picking it up in childhood. Well, in a way she was still a child, so it probably didn’t matter. Even so, she had found herself doing it with increasing and alarming frequency as of late: for a reason anyone as close to Maya as herself could guess. That woman wasn’t Maya at all, or at least not really.

It had started sometime in the Dwephi battles as the Haf-Theti were driven back, between the clashing of blades and the quiet whispers of Maya’s usually devout prayers which of late had become unerringly blasphemous. Maybe if she had stepped in then, when whatever had changed her had yet to fully lock itself around Maya’s heart, this could have all been avoided and this diplomatic visit could have remained a diplomatic visit. Instead, something far darker was trying to turn this into full-blown war. Well, full-blown war again.

Soon.

She abandoned the braid and left it to unwind in its own time. The earth was shaking, ship shifting violently from side to side.

It smelt like death.

* * *

Janeth thanked whatever Haf-Theti shipbuilder had spent his time carving such wonderful handholds into the side of this ship. Even with the battering sea wind and the after-shocks of magic, the two men had almost no difficulty scaling the woodwork.

They heaved themselves quietly over the ornate gunwale at the ship’s stern and landed with twin thuds on the vast deck. Janeth cast a wary glance around in case he had been wrong about Maya being the only one aboard.

“We’re the only ones here. Maya’s all the way at the front,” whispered Reinart, barely audible above the sounds of water and the surging crowd.

“Then why are you whispering?” said Janeth, though his own voice was not much louder. “We need to get to Maya and stop her. And we also have to figure out what she wants and what happened to the original mission.”

“Do you really think we can take her on? I have no idea how she’s tapping into this much power,” said Reinart.

“We will have to figure it out as we go,” said Janeth. He grinned wryly. “We’re pretty good at that by now.”

Reinart shrugged and started walking forward. Janeth followed and then paused. Listening. Straining with every bit of extra perception he could glean from his connection to the Seamless Eye. What had made him stop? Had he heard something? Not exactly.

Reinart had realised that Janeth was no longer behind him and turned with an irritated expression. He opened his mouth to urge his companion to hurry up when Janeth silenced him with a raised palm.

“Maya’s not the only one on board this ship,” Janeth said slowly. He felt it again. Not quite a touch nor a sound. But a sensation of a very faint pulse. He swayed on the spot

trying to pinpoint its direction, then started to cautiously tread toward the front of the ship. He passed Reinart, but did not note the long-suffering look halfway between patience and frustration on his face.

"It's strongest right here," Janeth said finally. He stopped about halfway between the stern and prow, glad of the continued commotion on the wharf that masked his search and kept Maya's attention.

Reinart dropped to the deck, his eye catching a detail that Janeth had missed.

"There's a latch here. I think this is a trapdoor. Here, move your feet off of it, Jan."

Janeth obliged, shuffling backward gracefully. He looked down and saw that Reinart was inspecting a circle of metal about half the size of a man's palm embedded into the deck. As Reinart traced them, he could see the lines that formed a small rectangle with the metal circle at one end.

After a few tense moments of running his hands over the smooth surface of the deck, Reinart's face broke into a grin. He carefully placed his hands on either side of the metal circle about shoulder width apart, fingertips splayed. He pushed down sharply and the latch sprang open. He caught at the loop of metal that flicked up and drew it smoothly back. A small section of deck rolled seamlessly sideways to reveal a dark vertical tunnel with slim rungs set into the side. The pulse was stronger now.

As they peered over the edge of the tunnel, Janeth could just make out a small figure that looked almost childlike drawing back from the sudden shaft of light. The pulse was now pounding against his extra sense. He felt as if there was something familiar about the figure he had glimpsed. Why couldn't he stop thinking about the stories his mother had told him? Hazel. The name came into his mind in time with the pulse. *Ha-zel*. He understood.

Janeth dropped into the hole, catching at the rungs and, ignoring Reinart's hissed astonishment, climbed into the chamber below. With each rung he descended, a foreboding weight increasingly pressed on his mind. This was no self-borne trepidation, though Janeth's thoughts were indeed racing with wariness. No, this weight was coming from an external force, an immense one the likes of which Janeth had never dared to imagine. He was under no illusion that his meagre abilities of self-hypnosis were warding it off. Janeth was acutely aware that should it be so inclined, it could snuff his life out before he had a chance to even blink. But, for now, it seemed Janeth was under no immediate threat of instant death. While he moved admittedly slowly, the heaviness in his mind made the short descent seem an eternity.

With a few final steps, he reached the chamber at the bottom of the hole. He stood there, hesitating, back to the

figure he had seen from above. The pressure on his mind was almost unbearable and yet, somehow, he knew the force was in fact holding itself back... He shuddered at the recognition that whoever controlled this force held a power far, far beyond his comprehension. Finally, he turned to face the figure.

Janeth's breath halted. In a mix of shock and horror, his mind was refusing to will his lungs to fill with air. From above, he had thought the small figure below to be that of a child. It. Was. Not... Small though the being was, it was *not* a child... His eyes were locked on what could only be described as a husk of a human, barely more than leathery, wrinkled skin clinging to a skeleton frame. And yet, in some terrible incongruity, the leathery skin glowed with a radiance of vitality. The silvery-blond hair glistened and gleamed in the faint light, softly flowing as though caught in a gentle breeze, though the air hung dead and still. The eyes, sunken deep into recessed sockets, shone with the glimmer of youthful energy.

A coarse rasp escaped from the figure's papery lips. "Breathe..." it commanded.

His paralysis dispelled, Janeth's lungs filled suddenly with cool air. His body and mind screamed with relief, dots blurring his vision. He hadn't realised how close he had come to fainting from lack of oxygen.

"What..." he began, but stopped himself. "*Who* are you?"

"You know who I am," the figure said, her voice sandpaper against Janeth's ears.

"N-no I... I don't," he stuttered.

A voice spoke behind him, and he whirled around to face it.

"Perhaps you will believe what you know in your mind if you see me like this," said a small girl, her twinkling blue eyes piercing a knowing gaze into Janeth.

"Hazel Tayhey..."

The words escaped his lips and Janeth knew them to be true. The image of the girl faded away into nothingness. Janeth turned back to the ancient figure, emptiness sinking into his heart.

"Yes, Janeth," Hazel said.

"How—"

"I know you," she rasped, "through my precious Maya's mind."

Hazel breathed, the air rattling as she inhaled.

"Now come, Janeth," she said, turning to a corridor leading into the deep bowels of the ship. "There is much for us to do..."

Editor's Review: A City with No Colour

This chain had me hooked from start to finish. It successfully manages to evoke a world that's far bigger than what we see in the story, so that as a reader I feel I've explored only a small fraction of it. Hazel and Maya's characters, in particular, are intriguing too. Like so many chainwritten stories, the ending to this one is tantalising, almost like the start of a novel, and yet also very satisfying.

The Ultimate Tshowdown!

Multiple Anonymous

Young Genzo Wakabayashi was diving around Tokyo City like a big playground.

When suddenly Lyra Bevilaqua burst out from The Dust, and hit Genzo Wakabayashi with a Pine-Marten-Demon thrust.

Genzo Wakabayashi got stropopy and began his goal kick, but didn't expect to be blocked by Archie the Topless Oiled Mechanic.

Who proceeded to open up a can of Sergeant Archie-Boxer, when a Snake-Demon-Priest came out of the blue and tried to sock her...

Then they started beating up Archie the Paladin, but then all got flattened by Coulter's Malevolently-Silent Demon-Orangutan!

But before it could brachiate back to The Magisterium, the Steam-Powered Georapphe Edition of Abraham Lincoln popped out of his Yettisburg-Mausoleum.

And took a 24-pounder Howitzer out from under his hat and yet preferred to blow the Demon-Ape away with his 960-pounder Demon-Rat.

But he ran out of tracer-cheese and both The Ape and The Rat ran away, because Oozora Tsubasa and his Demon-Eagle-of-Gravitational-Defiance turned up to save the day!

This is the Ultimate Tshowdown of Ultimate Dustiny. Good Gaiuses, Bad Betties and Explosions as far as the eye can tsee...

And only one Franchise will tsurvive, I wonder which it will be!

This is the Ultimate Tshowdown of Ultimate Dustiny.

Genzo Wakabayashi took a bite out of Oozora's Eagle, like Scrooge McDuck took a bite out of Christmas.

And then Archie came back in a yellow pick-up truck...

But the Season-1 Extra-Beefy Edition of Reggie Mantle jumped out and landed on his back.

And Lyra Bevilaqua was injured, and her fluctuating Demon-Stoat was trying to get steady

(winter fur, silly Pantilimon, not summer plumage!)

When the Steam-Powered Georapphe Edition of Abraham Lincoln came back with a Yettisburg Address, while cross-dressed, quite stressed and indeed in a period dress...

But suddenly something caught his eminently long and be-spotted leg and he tripped:

Jughead Jones had taken him down with a frisbee-throw

of his clowning-crown!

Then he saw Genzo Wakabayashi sneaking up from behind.

And he reached for his Watergnu-Demon which he just couldn't find.

'Cause Lyra Bevilaqua's Demon in Temporary-Pupating-Ferret form stole it.

And he shot and he missed, and Reggie Mantle deflected it with his mighty basketballer-towelled wrist.

Then he jumped in the air and did a wintersault,

While Abraham Lincoln tried to Polecat-vault,

Using Lyra's Demon's Latest Mustelid incarnation's elongated spine...

Onto Oozora Tsubasa's Demon-Eagle, but they collided in the air with Wallace AND Gromit,

causing the Eagle to temporarily lose his Antigravity and get hit by a suicide-number-4 Claire-Bear Heroes-Cheerleader-Plummet!

This is the Ultimate Tshowdown of Ultimate Dustiny.

Good Gaiuses, Bad Betties and Explosions as far as the eye can tsee...

And only one Franchise will tsurvive Hera's Curse of Tsubasaverse Physics, I wonder which it will be!

This is the Ultimate Tshowdown...

Demons sang out in a hell-raising chorus

As up from The Underworld ascended Steve Hyuga and his Demon-Tiger!

Who delivered a Football Strike which could Shatter Goalposts, Whole Stadia, and Certainly Bones

into the Separately-individually-crowned Gonads of Jughead Jones,

Who fell over on the ground, writhing in pain,

As Lyra Bevilaqua's Demon-Stoat changed back into not a but THE Wolverine!

But Steve Hyuga and his Demon-Tiger saw through his clever disguise

And they crushed the Honey Badger? Weasel? Otter! Demon's head in between their four mighty thighs!

Then Betty with Vixen-Demon and Betty of the FBI, 50's Betty, Next-Door Betty, Dominant Dark-Wigged Betty, Serpent-Ponytail-Demon Betty, Rivervale Betty, Keep-it-in-the-Family Psycho-Betty, Amateur-Sleuth Betty, Trash-Bag-Killer's Target-of-Taunting Betty, Betty the Aura Reader,

Betty the Witch and Betty the Protective Sister,

and the Season-2 Pencil-Necked Miscasting of Ser Gregor Clegane,
and Karl-Heinz Schneider, and the Furano Back Four,
and Hodor all the while succeeding to Hold The Door,

And all the pupils of Todd Chavez's school for Clown-Dentists and Dentist-Clowns,

and all the Military Rabbits from all of the Watership Downs...

Pegasus Demons from the Percy Jackson franchise,
and Reina with Demon Dogs of Silver and Gold,
the Pepper Bore from Reign who had borrowed
Cinderella's Hair-plaiting Bird Demons,
Moana and her Rock-eating Chicken-Demon,
Luke Skywalker and his Azuroolactescent Padawan-Walrus-Demon...

A Flea Controlling a Rat controlling a Chef, controlling the Culinary World!

Horniman with his Smoothness-Demon-Worb and Nagini with her Demon-Voldemort,

and Doctor Doofensmirtz and Sofia the First (and her pony-sized Pegasus-Demon for sport...)

Long John Silver and Blind Pew, and Dick Dastardly and his Demon-Muttley-Crew.

Miscellaneous other Puppies, Guppies, Yuppies,
Hipsters, Tipsters and Tiplers.

(The last being a logical, safe and ethical source of ex-international footballer children's football team coaches, apparently.)

Robin's pet Starfish, Batman's pet Robin and Alfred's pet Bat!

And a Platypus named Perry, and Pippin and Merry, and Tom and Jerry,

and two Pythons called Terry and another armed with a loganberry,

and all the Nazgul stuck at Buckland Ferry,

and Halle Berry and a Bomb called Cherri, and Jim Woodall and his Wherry,

and Huckleberry, Tackleberry and Tuffleberry,

and all of House Atreides' Ornithoptery,

and Odd-Job and King Bob and his Guitar-Playing Minion Jerry,

and The Entire Internet's combined Rofflecoptery (and Peppa Pig's private Trufflecoptery).

And all the Seafaring Knights in the history of House Serry,

and a park-bench-full of former Swedish World Cup Defenders who'd finished all the sherry,

Teenage Sandwich-Wizard Terry,

and the consequent rampant Dysentery,

Mary, Mary Quite Contrary,

Head Honcho Hullabaloo Jerry and the Tooth Fairy,
Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, the broadbrimhatted Sir Terry,

Bloo and Berry, every last Girl from Derry,

and the Rhode Island Trooper played by Jim Carrey...

And Neville Longbottom with his Wobblesquirty Plant-Demon-Thing,

alongside Cinderella's Rat-Demons and Rapunzel's Demon-God-Pet-Chameleon-Thing.

And the Mandalorian and Captain Corelli's Demon-Mandolin,

and Every Balrog, Troll and Orc responsible for the Fall of Gondolin,

And the Alpha-Zero Go Engine, and Princess Elsa and her Demon-Snowman Olaf,

in sinister version and always having the last laugh!

And Miluvatar - The One God of all Belgian Dogs -

and an entire Lineage of Movie-making Nepotistic Frogs!

George Martin's Phantom Tortoise Messaging System,
Guy Fieri and Bianca Castafiore...

And Professor Tomahto and Professor Tomayto,

Mr Potato Head and the Great Mutato,

Every B-list actor to feature in any Sharknado,

The Terminator-Bodied Edition of Kant and the Super-Saiyan beard-upgrade of Plato,

Princess Ariel and her Demon Crab-and-Flounder,

The Hamburglar in the act of stealing a Quarter-Pounder,

The Rhinoceros-Police from Dr Who,

and Tigger and Piglet and Kanga and Roo!

Combined forces to confront Steve as he blasted open the Twelve Monkey's Film-set's Zoo...

So what, said Steve, calmly carving Jim Carrey in two with a strike.

For I have a Demon Tiger, and so Do Whatever I Like!

"However," said Princess Jasmine and Prince Adam together: "we have Demon Tigers too!"

At which point Bob the Builder, Bill the Butcher,

All Anonymous callers using the name P.S. Taker,

Everybody ever pranked on live TV by Ashton Kutcher,

Mutch the Miller's Son, and THE Doctor (meaning Tom Baker)

And every questionably-named seafarer in Captain Pugwash's crew

shoved Steve Hyuga and his Demon Tiger headfirst into an enormous pot of stew!

The planet the match was on was so small that the goalposts were hidden behind a horizon.

But after carefully checking for Baobabs and Vulcanicity,

Rabbit's Relations mounted a Great Expotition,

to find not the North Pole but Two Goal Posts.
To try to even the score, while busting some past
matches' ghosts.
They returned triumphantly to say that Hester the Hare
had made a balloon-sighting,
and that the Opposite Half of the planet even enjoyed
quite good lighting!

And then Thomas the Tank Engine began to huff and puff
down the left wing...

As the Pepper Bore hacked Piedmont FC Trainer's analytic
engine,
changing its searches from Google to Bing!
With Steve and his Tiger temporarily incapacitated
upside-down up to their knees in the pot
which was also both thermally and capsaicinidudiously
hot,
Piedmont FC now had to rely on their Keeper,
Richard Tex-Tex, a Karate connoisseur
and thus an exception to Einstein's Universality of Free
Fall Principle!

He repeatedly redirected himself by bouncing feet-first off
his sidepost,

Stopping every shot, to the extent that the alliance
thought that they were toast....

But Neville Longbottom's Plant-Demon sidekick's squirry
sap then glued

Richard Tex-Tex's feet to his goalpost when he'd moved to

bounce off one time too many!

And while Gargamel just laughed to death and Robotic
Oliver Cromwell was too much of a prude,

Oozura Tsubasa and Karl-Heinz Schneider jumped on the
opportunity and scored

many a bendy, beaked and talanted legal-eagle goal,
via their uncanny foreign-twin telepathic connection!

Thus reaping in a Crimson Permanent Assurance sized
share of profit!

It was the most messed up score that the world ever saw
With civilians looking on in total awe: 19 to 84.

The game raged on for a hundred minutes of extra time.

For many stretchers, Dr Quinn AND Dr House,

the Hogwarts AND Rivendell Hospital Wings,

The Rebel Alliance's Prosthetic-Droid-Surgeon AND Ed
Begley,

AND Leonard "Bones" McCoy were repeatedly needed.

But eventually The Champion stood, and The Rest saw
their Better:

Sponge Bob in his Demon-blood-stained Squarepants!

This is the Ultimate Tshowdown of ultimate Dustiny.

Questionably-Good Gaiuses, Bad-Bad-Bad! Hyuga-Tigers,
and Spongiform-Dominions as far as the eye can see...

And only one Franchise has survived, so the
Tsquarepantsniverse is all that there is left on TV:

The Ultimate Dustiny!

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF CRYPTOGRAPHY FOR THE ART OF SPELLCRAFT

A Prosaic Account of the Fennmyre Affair

Phoebe Fay, Jack, Jago Howard Gannicliffe Westaway, NH, Thomas Haslam, Sol Dubock, Simon Canniffe, Evan
Indigo, Harley Jones, Buck Blake, Sarah, Mr <Tom>ble

"Do you have a library membership?" the woman asked.
She was human, with a kind face well-framed by her purple
box braids. Her name badge read 'Amber Williams'.

"Beg your pardon?" the elf asked.

"A library membership," she said. "If you have taken
books out before, you should have a library membership."
The tall, grey-haired elf hesitated as Amber examined the
books. This Cambridge University Library was home to
many aged books, so she was entirely unfazed by the
tomes dumped on the desk in a cloud of dust. But none of
them seemed to have any indication of library cataloguing.
She looked through the books one by one, finding a
slip in the newer looking volume. Well, 'new' was an over-
statement. The slip had the header 'The Library of the
University of Cambridge', followed by a brief list of names
in ink. The last entry read 'E. L. Fennmyre 13 August
1901'. So that one did belong to the library, although it

had never seen the walls of this building before. Amber
glanced at the name of the book and typed it in: *Essential
Abjuration Spells and Rituals for the Goodness and Protec-
tion of Beings and Property*, with *The Society of Abjuration
Mages* written underneath. To her surprise, there was a
result, but there was no location or status listed.

"Are you an alumnus?" Amber asked.

"No, I am... was... a Fellow of Emmanuel College. I was a
lecturer of... well, it's not something you teach nowadays.
That is not important – I have come to give these back, or
donate them, I suppose."

She sighed, thinking about the paperwork of cataloguing
them from scratch. "I guess we can take these. Thank you
for your contribution."

The elf seemed not to hear her, already striding out of the

building through the revolving doors.

“Excuse me! What was your name? We need it for our records!” she shouted after him. The elf turned at the last moment with a light smile playing on his mouth.

“Here!” he said back to her as he threw a card towards her. It followed a graceful arc across the room, coming to a perfect rest just in front of her. “And make sure the books don’t get left near a radiator!”

The business card had no phone number that Amber could see, just that name again, E. L. Fennmyre. She flipped it over, even more confused.

‘Emmanuel College Subway. 6pm Wednesdays. Fortnightly.’ And below that, ‘The Society of Abjuration Mages’.

Amber spent much of the rest of the afternoon engaged in the dusty, unpleasant process of checking and cataloguing the old books. Occasionally, she could be heard to chuckle to herself.

It wasn't entirely clear where they were to go: they were of a type that the university had largely stopped even trying to stock since the passage of such matters from the public eye in the 1920s. Oh, certainly the more public-facing sort of occult bookseller, stocking scholarly editions of the Emerald Tablet or the Alchymical Chariot (and the occasional bit of New Age dross) would see its publications find their way into the archives; it was a deposit library, after all. But the sort of thing produced by little private presses that operated in some crack in the realities lurking between Brighton and Hell, or dictated via an etheric voice that boomed through a student who had experimented with some old ritual - those the institution no longer attempted to obtain.

It wasn't, she mused, as if they didn't consider the books and those who wrote them *real*. Perhaps a few librarians might have been shocked to learn of an elf still walking around in the present day in much the same way that the average Church of England priest would be surprised to find himself suddenly greeted by an angel, but they all had enough scholarly training to know that such things were not mere myth. No, the neglect of such works in recent years stemmed more from the fact that, in this age of Amazon and online news and terrorism, inside this blocky 1930s building full of electric lights and card-readers, they couldn't possibly seem entirely *serious*. Who had the time, in this day and age, in this *economy*, to pursue such things?

Besides, books of true power that were still kept around tended to go missing with depressing regularity. That had been what such volumes had been known for in all of her sixteen years working here - for the times that some student ran out of the building with one and was never seen again, or a window on the fourth floor was removed and an entire shelf of rare old biographies thrown all about as the intruder looked for a copy of *Quinsereme's Maleficent Workings* which was the only thing taken. They simply weren't worth the trouble.

By the time she had done, secreting the two in what seemed appropriate places deep in the structure and suit-

ably far from any easy means of ingress, it was late. Strictly, she should have left an hour ago, but Amber had never much liked leaving work unfinished and she wouldn't have wanted to spring this on whoever was first in tomorrow. The library was illuminated only by the bright actinic glow of the ceiling lights, which always made it seem vaguely like an old hospital, as she walked swiftly down the stairs towards the exit. There was nobody else in the lobby - not unusual for this hour, but somehow, today, enough to cause her shoulders to pull in with an irrational twinge of fear. She ducked her head and hurried across the glossy floor towards the doors.

* * *

She hadn't intended to bring it home.

Amber had no memory of slipping the book into her satchel, nor intention, but alongside her security and cryptography textbooks tumbled out *Essential Abjuration Spells and Rituals for the Goodness and Protection of Beings and Property* when she upended the bag onto her bed later that night. She supposed that it could have got jumbled up in her things in her rush to hurry home, but if there was one thing she took care to never rush or skip over, it was proper library procedure - and she certainly had not checked this one out under her own name. Truly barbaric. The idea that such could have been the case repulsed her more than the niggling possibility that the book had inserted itself in her bag by itself, or rather by magic.

Of course, she had great appreciation and respect for the classical Arts - she *did* work part-time in a library looking after and making available such texts, after all - but her 'abjuration' came in a rather conspicuously different form. More of a science than a humanity or Other. One could consider cryptography to be an art of defensive and protective 'magics', repelling and dispelling unwanted workings, but such were only magics by metaphor: for the bewildering technicality, rather than any real spiritualism.

Although... she had to admit that a combination of these stunningly parallel arts could be... a rather curious concept. Really rather. Really curious.

'Rather curious' enough to find herself lingering outside Emmanuel College Subway at 5:59pm, on Wednesday.

* * *

No sooner had the clock struck 6 than a large crowd of robed figures gathered, some seeming to step sideways out of thin air. Amber followed them as they hustled into the subway, feeling slightly self-conscious of her work clothes she hadn't had time to change out of, before the leader pulled out an ornately-carved staff, said a few words that seemed to slide out of her brain as soon as they entered, and slammed said staff on one of the tiles of the subway. Suddenly, colourful runes flashed around the walls of the tunnel, before the entire passageway seemed to lurch, twist and distort. After that nauseating experience, the group continued seemingly unbothered to the other end, and Amber gasped as they emerged into a landscape entirely different from the familiar North Court.

While the buildings could be mistaken for any central col-

lege's courts (well, aside from a gaping hole in one of the walls that looked like the brickwork had *melted*), the sky told a different story – it was pitch black, devoid of colour aside from the occasional flashing purple bolt of energy. "Welcome, newcomer," intoned the leader from before, "to the Other Court of Emmanuel College. Constructed in 1912 using the bleeding edge of dimensional manipulation techniques, its purpose was to establish the college as a leader in arcane education. Alas, the political climate and several instances of students ... disappearing forced the college to tether the entrance tunnel back into reality, and now almost nobody knows that the subway doesn't actually physically occupy the space under the road."

Amber took a deep breath. She hadn't known what she'd been expecting, but it certainly wasn't this. Almost instinctively, she reached into her satchel until her fingers brushed up against the book - she'd felt the need to convince herself it hadn't just disappeared amongst the ongoing sorcery. Looking up again her eyes fell upon the leader, their robe shimmering slightly in a sort-of deep red colour - or was it blue? The shade seemed to never settle at a single tone, dancing gracefully from one to the next. She was determined to ask someone about the book and Fennmyre was nowhere to be seen so this leader looked to be the next best option.

"The 'Other' Court?" she found herself repeating "I'm not sure I—"

"Yes, of course – the Other Court," they cut her off. "It exists in a plane parallel to what I think you would consider North Court,"

"Yes I gathered that, but—"

"Oh, you did? That is wonderful – I'm so very glad one of our esteemed members here has invited you."

"Well, actually that's why—"

"And it has been an absolute pleasure to meet you miss..."

"Oh, um - Amber...?"

"Ah, a lovely name - you may refer to me as Peregrine, the chair of this society. Now I'm sorry, but I simply must get started on this week's meeting." Every word Peregrine uttered was with a sense of great importance.

"It is with great pleasure," Peregrine droned on, addressing the congregation, "that I call this meeting to order. Among our number this evening are the most esteemed, most celebrated members of the magical community, and I'm so pleased to have—"

That was about as far as they got before the thing grabbed them. Amber couldn't quite describe what the thing *was*, but it was very easy for her to describe what it *wasn't*. It wasn't, for example, visible. For a second, she thought Peregrine had launched themselves backwards and into the sky, but their panicked screaming made her change her mind rather quickly. It also wasn't exactly invisible. Looking closer, she noticed the flashes of purple light in the sky changing, becoming more vivid, more alive. Not all of them, not all at once, it was more like a figure

was circling the crowd from above, shifting the colour of the sky behind it. The closer she looked; the more detail Amber spotted. Peregrine's robe had the shape of three long, jagged talons across it that had become similarly saturated, and even the sky seemed darker, blacker in places, silhouetting a monstrous, skeletal shape with bat-like wings that seemed to stretch into infinity.

Amber was in the middle of deciding the creature *wasn't* the sort of thing she wanted to spend any more time studying when a firm hand on her shoulder wrenched her backwards and made the decision for her. She felt her stomach lurch, and in an instant, she was sprawled on her back in the subway, looking up at her rescuer. Fennmyre did not seem especially pleased to see her.

"I had assumed," the elf said, her tone annoyingly reminiscent of a disappointed supervisor, "that you would attempt to read the book I gave you before charging headfirst into the cryptic plane."

"Well in my defence, I didn't know that the meeting was going to be in the cryptic plane."

"You thought it would just be in the subway?" he asked, unimpressed. "Come on, get up, we don't have much time."

"Um, are they going to be alright in there?" Amber replied, getting to her feet and trying to wipe the dirt from the underpass off her hands. "I don't particularly want to go back in, but.. what even was that thing? What happened there? I have so many questions. Does the Society have a licence for that plane?"

"Not here," Fennmyre whispered urgently. "And no, the Society of Abjuration Mages didn't think to apply for a plane licence when it began its covert super-liminal operations, but that should be the least of your worries."

Amber straightened out her box braids as Fennmyre continued.

"And as for what happened in there... That was an Aberration, looked like a bit of a mean one, but that was an inter-society meeting so the mages from Evocation and Conjur-ation should be able to deal with it. Why Divination didn't see it coming is another question, or why they didn't let us know if they did. The Aberrations are getting stronger though. Anyway, not here – walk with me." At this Fennmyre turned on his heels and walked towards the subway exit, back up in the direction of the Porters' Lodge.

As they stepped out into the cool evening air, Amber was relieved to see a very normal looking overcast Cambridge sky. A few students hurried towards the dining hall, and a tired-looking fellow strolled across New Court.

"Well, thanks for pulling me out of there. I was hoping to learn a bit about Abjuration tonight, but I think I bit off a bit more than I could chew," Amber said, with a nervous laugh. "I'd best get home though, thanks again for getting me out."

"Ah, of course. Goodbye."

At this, Amber felt like she should turn and leave. But for some reason she just stood there, a little awkwardly.

“Unless.. You still want to learn some Abjuration tonight? You know, if I was a Divination mage, I might think there was a reason I came to you today – a librarian with a thing for cryptography – and dropped off an Abjuration grimoire.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we need your help – all of us. There’s trouble brewing in the Other University. We tampered with a lock that we maybe shouldn’t have, and we – how did you put it? We bit off a bit more than we could chew.”

Fennmyre started walking, motioning for Amber to follow. “I always think better on the move,” he said, and outlined the situation as they strolled round Emmanuel’s gardens, beautiful in the dying daylight. About a month ago, one of the Divination mages (“Chadwick – very brainy chap – played rugby for England, you know”) had approached the Abjuration society for help: some of his spellbooks had been re-ordered, and he wanted some protection casting on them. “It took us a while to realise that he meant the *words* of his books had been re-ordered – which is a far more serious matter...” Peregrine took it to the heads of the Societies and they found that this phenomenon was wider spread. “Every day, more mages came to us, seeking protection for their books – we couldn’t keep up! So we knew we had to find a way to root out the cause of the problem. With their spellbooks all out of order, the mages from the other societies were unable to help themselves – but none of the Abjuration mages were afflicted by this. We thought this was because we were, naturally, more protective of our collections than our interdisciplinary colleagues – but then, three days ago, a handful of our books went wrong as well. Have you seen the Oriental Plane before?”

They had come to a locked gate. Amber had explored the public spaces of most of the colleges in her undergraduate days, but had never been into the Fellows’ Garden. Fennmyre fiddled with his keys and got the gate open. Beyond stood the extraordinary tree, branches diving to the ground and rising again as if trunks sprung anew from the flower-spangled lawn beneath it, the late spring foliage concealing the great space within, barely accessible between the branches. As Amber squeezed through a feeling of deep peace and unknowable comfort came over her. “Here,” Fennmyre beamed, “is the safest place in England. The tree itself is an Abjuration, protecting the space beneath it; this is the shade of the first garden, of Eden itself. Here,” he said, suddenly direct, “we can speak without being overheard.” *Were people listening in before?* Amber thought to herself – though the tree’s calming influence left her unworried by this prospect.

“It is one thing to hear of another’s problems – quite another to experience them for yourself. We were in turmoil! And in our desperation to get at some spells that might actually be readable, we – I – did something most unwise. Only I could pass through the protective spells that guard the Tower, for I cast them when it was built. But the topmost room, where the bulk of the Abjuration

books are housed, was padlocked. I thought it was a mundane lock at the time – but I’m afraid I did something most unwise in breaking in.”

Fennmyre paused, and rolled his eyes. “Turns out, it was warded. And powerfully. And if there’s one thing you don’t do as an abjurer, it’s try and break an abjuration you don’t know anything about. That’s how you fall for a trap. Luckily this one only knocked me out for fifteen minutes or so, but that was fifteen minutes of *no wards* protecting that tower. *Nothing*. By the time I got in there, every book was scrambled beyond any comprehension. And worst of all, one was missing. And I can’t even tell which one since the records book was scrambled too!”

“Could I... have a look at one of these scrambled books?”

“Of course, they’re everywhere at this point, even my personal spellbook is scrambled now. Here, though I don’t see it doing much good. It’s thoroughly incomprehensible now. I’ve tried every decoding spell I could think of, but nothing works!”

Amber took the slim, leatherbound book from Fennmyre as he continued his rant, flipping through it. The words were, indeed, quite scrambled, seemingly randomly. But something didn’t seem quite right. Her cryptography brain was whirring now, and she found herself skimming more and more pages, clutching at a pattern that was just out of reach. “Fennmyre, this is your spellbook. Surely you know at least some section of it by heart, right?”

Fennmyre paused in the middle of a rant about the intricacies of dis-abjuration magics, looking at her quizzically. “Well, of course, I know most of the spells off by heart. What kind of a mage would I be if I didn’t memorise any spells? But it’s my diary too! All those memories, lost forever!”

“Could you, maybe, recite to me one of the pages? Say, this one?” She showed him a page with an illustration of a collection of ornate keys.

“Of course, that’s my password storing spell! Can’t trust computers these days, gotta do it all yourself. Reading from the top, it says, or it *should* say: ‘Password Storing Spell, for the cautious and rightfully mistrustful user of modern technology. Once you have a password in mind, cut three strips of fabric from an old left sock...’”

As Fennmyre recited his spell, Amber copied his words down on a notepad, occasionally glancing across at the spellbook as she did so. There *was* a pattern! A weird, complicated one, but it was there. The spellbook wasn’t scrambled, but *encrypted*, and all she had to do was work out the key.

After some cross-referencing between the two texts (and a couple of consultations of her cryptography textbooks) she found herself staring at a sentence she’d scribbled on her notepad. She read it to Fennmyre. “*Maleficent works becoming the few, in lilac thunder he comes anew*. What on earth is that supposed to mean?”

“No idea, where’d you hear that?”

"It's the key, used to encrypt your book."

"Wait, that's what you were doing? You unscrambled it?"

"Um, duh, what did you think I was up to?"

"I just thought you were interested in my spells and sketches. But that's wonderful news! Quick, we have to get to the Tower and decrypt that records book. No time for the usual routes. Take my hand."

Amber grabbed Fennmyre's hand, and immediately felt her belly lurch. Dazed and slightly sick, she opened her eyes. Instead of in the Fellow's garden, they stood in front of one of the highest towers in all of Cambridge – the University Library's Tower.

"It's up there, let's go," said Fennmyre hurriedly.

Amber nodded and followed him inside. They ran up all the 247 steps, and when they reached the highest floor, Fennmyre took them to a small bookshelf, tucked away in a dark corner. Still panting from the climb, he mumbled a few words, and the books on the shelf slowly moved to the side. A second later, a tiny door became visible.

With a small nod, Fennmyre gestured for Amber to follow him.

Once inside, Amber's mouth fell open. Stair after stair reached to uncountable bookshelves. The rows of books continued as far as Amber could see, in all directions.

* * *

"It's up this stair, I promise, it's the last," heaved Fennmyre, after they must have climbed at least another 247 steps.

Amber didn't have the breath to reply, so she just nodded.

A few painful steps later, they reached a door with an opened padlock still hanging around the handle.

The door slowly slid open. A shiver ran down Amber's back. Fennmyre didn't seem surprised, so she followed him inside. He stood next to a thick, old book. He leafed through the pages, until he found a page that seemed to satisfy him.

"Can you repeat that key to me, please?"

Amber obeyed, and a focused expression appeared on Fennmyre's face. His tongue sticking between his lips, he waved his hands.

"There you go!" he shrieked. "Look, look at it!"

He held up the book and showed the page to Amber. The words she read made some sense, and by Fennmyre's happy smile, she assumed the decryption had worked.

"So, what's missing?"

A moment later, Fennmyre's smile disappeared even quicker than it had appeared.

"It's... It's the book of the Abjuration of-

Before Fennmyre could finish his sentence, the door burst open.

"The Book of the Abjuration of Banishment and Malice' I believe," sneered Peregrine, "and it is currently in your possession, Miss Amber."

Amber's mouth lay agape as she staggered backwards two steps. Fennmyre's hand moved, and a fluorescent blue barrier appeared between Amber and Peregrine, but it was quickly shattered by the advancing figure slamming their staff to the floor.

"Your tricks will not work on me, Fennmyre," Peregrine boomed, spit flying from their lips.

Amber's eyebrows contorted as she looked back at the elf that she thought she trusted. Was there more to him than appeared?

Her question was answered when she noticed those same translucent claws that had been in the Other Court emerge from Fennmyre's chest. Peregrine's eyes widened, but only slightly. They were not surprised at seeing the beast once more, it seemed, merely at the timing. They lifted their staff into the air and spun it in ever quickening circles, muttering something beneath their breath. As what one could only assume was the creature's head began to rise from Fennmyre, a blast of light shot from Peregrine's rippling staff, encasing the monster in a lilac orb that shrank until the shadow was no more.

Peregrine remained composed, and spoke to Fennmyre in a reserved tone. "Foolish to think the same ploy would work twice, Fennmyre." A quick movement of Peregrine's fingers left Fennmyre bound by yellow cords, floating in the air. Peregrine then turned to Amber.

"I am truly sorry you became caught up in this," Peregrine said, a look of reverence on their face.

"Just what exactly is going on?" Amber attempted to shout, but the breath barely escaped her lips.

"We could not be certain until you decoded the scrambled books, so we thank you for that. The troubles with stolen magical books had been worrying us, as it seemed someone was trying to combine the powers of all the magical schools, with who knows what devastating effects. The suspect list was not certain until Fennmyre here," the cords of light tightened and Fennmyre grunted, "concocted a rather unbelievable story of being knocked unconscious for the perfect amount of time for someone to wreak havoc in the abjuration library."

Amber's eyes rapidly traced over the ground as she began to piece everything together. The books, the attack with Fennmyre present yet secret – she had almost been framed. Her eyes turned now to Fennmyre, who only looked back in silent fury.

Taking a slow breath in, Amber spoke to Peregrine, keeping her eyes locked with Fennmyre's. "Thank you, Peregrine. I think I've been a bit naïve here, suddenly having to deal with all this magic. I think I want to go home now."

With this last sentence she turned to Peregrine, and re-

mained as composed as she could.

"Very well Miss Amber," replied Peregrine, "we shall deal with him."

With the final word, the room began to spin around Amber faster and faster, until it began to resemble somewhere very familiar to her, and slowed.

Surrounded by the familiar shelves of the University Library, Amber turned to the person who had just approached her desk and blinked.

"Do you have a library membership?" she said, but her mouth moved merely through muscle memory, while she pondered on whether that mystical book was still lying on her duvet.

Author Reviews: Practical Applications of Cryptography for the Art of Spellcraft

I'm really happy with how this chain ended up - magic not really being actively hidden, just kind of unpopular and esoteric is a fun take on urban fantasy, and the twist at the end felt surprisingly well set up for something chainwritten.—Simon Cannife

Over the course of several recent volumes of TTBA, Cambridge has reappeared as a contemporary fantasy setting, and it feels like all these disconnected short stories are starting to form a lore of their own, which makes it all the more exciting to read. Also, I quite selfishly included my own Dungeons and Dragons character in this story, and I was fascinated that in both the campaign they came from and in this story, they were scrambling spellbooks!—Phoebe Fay

Editor's Review

I loved the use of Cambridge as an urban fantasy setting in this chain (especially my own college, Emmanuel). I also liked the integration of cryptography alongside more traditional forms of dark magic.

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

The Cryptography Undergraduate's Guide to the Perils of Combining Schools of Magic

The Emperor's Eyes

Marko Trandafilovski

CW: Blood, body horror, mention of cannibalism, mention of suicide, mention of drug use

18/03/1998

1930 hours

Entry № 1

ings, remind yourself that you're in a place where you're free to be you. And if you start feeling overwhelmed, remember our safeword:

E – ***Emotion!***

A – ACCEPTANCE.

S – Serenity.

E – ***Elation!***

Objective:

Just a little template to help you get started with your first entry, Owen. I know how difficult it can be to open up. Our session earlier today was really positive; I can tell already that we're going to make a great team! As you're thinking – well, I guess that's just what I'd like you to try: rather than thinking of answers to the questions below – they're just starting-points, after all – sit, let the worries of the day fade away, and try to give *yourself* some time in the spotlight. Focus on your feelings – wants, annoyances, even fears – and just write them down for me. We can discuss them next time. Remember, forcing things won't work! If you're having trouble, maybe try some of the exercises we went through? I feel like that could be really constructive: ground yourself before you get going, scan yourself and your surround-

So:

1). Before diving in, take a moment to stop, breathe, settle. Remind yourself: why am I doing this? What's the point? How is it all going to help me?

It is new regulation. After the suicide last March all detectives are requested to report weekly to a designated psychiatrist. This psychiatrist is to provide them with a safe and open forum in which to air wishes, concerns, and grievances. These alterations to welfare-guidelines constitute the first stage of a pilot programme that is designed to universally raise standards of mental health across the SET. By the end of the year, I should find that I suffer anxi-

ety less frequently and less severely, form deeper and more stable relationships with colleagues, and perform more effectively both at and away from the prosecution of my work.

2). We've got this far. There are no stakes here – this is a safe and open forum – but there's definitely something to be gained. We've considered what it is that you want our sessions to bring you: how are you going to make sure that you take full advantage of the rich opportunities that they offer?

I will regularly attend sessions so as to ensure that no potential benefits escape me. To enable steady progress I will record goals and suggestions in a dedicated document, referring to it daily and setting aside at least fifteen minutes of my day, however difficult it may be to spare them, to labour towards personalised targets. I will bring this regularly to meetings, permitting you to view it and to air any observations that you may have to offer upon its state and upon my own, as the eyes of the programme might perceive them.

3). You, of course, are at the centre of our sessions – but your colleagues are going through them too. And being who we are, it's difficult – no one said, after all, that the journey would be easy: and it's certainly not a burden that you alone have to bear. You can't be your best you unless those around you are trying to too, and are ready, really ready, to let you spread your wings. This isn't just a personal odyssey: it's also a communal one. So: how are you going to give your co-workers those positive signals? How are you going to let them know that the space they share with you is no different, no less safe, than the one they've built with me?

It is perhaps perilous to court an atmosphere of safety and ease given the circumstances in which we tend to conduct our work. Neither are very conducive to the alertness that is so critical to every officer's safety. We must always assume, when we are called to the scene of a crime or a disturbance, that we are, upon arriving, on hostile ground: to think otherwise is to place little value upon the lives of other officers, co-responders, and defenceless citizens, not to speak of danger to one's own. I will nevertheless endeavour to make widely known at the department my all-embracing tolerance and remark favourably upon any changes in dress or hair that other officers see fit to adopt.

4). It's no secret that the life of the police officer isn't – forgive me – the walk in the park that it once was. Call-outs have become – shall we say – rather more exotic. We made some good progress earlier today towards breaking the ice, but I'd like something a little more concrete to segue from, next week. What's the most haunt-

ing case that you've had to deal with so far? And what are some of the strategies that have kept you going until now?

Officer James and I were called to the cellars of the British Museum last Saturday to encounter a charming arrangement of human bones about a Roman bust. They were set symmetrically and displayed visible bitemarks from what appeared at first inspection and were later confirmed to be human teeth. The bust itself had been daubed tastefully with a perfect patterning of blood. The outing was certainly exotic (as you put it) and our position happened to render necessary a sprint through Russell Square as we made our way to the scene. As I fell asleep that night I made sure to hold the picture it presented firm in my mind: when I awoke the next day I kept it with me still, and now too with increasing difficulty I struggle to keep it before my eyes. My father, also an officer, would often remind me of a maxim that I now hold close to my heart: always act, and you need never think. And if I cannot act in body then I do so in mind.

5). Let's conclude, maybe, with something a little more lightweight. I want this to be a fulfilling experience for both of us. You've had a slew of questions and suggestions from me: what about for me? Take this space as a chance to offer any constructive feedback that you think might benefit our sessions in future.

I would appreciate it were you to wear shoes with softer points upon your next visit to my office. After some investigation it seems that my current carpet will not recover from its contact with them during the last. It would be better too were you to select a less overpowering brand of perfume. Officer James could not but remark upon the needling odour penetrating the visitors' chair some hours after you had left as he made his daily report.

* * *

19/03/1998
2100 hours
Report
Incident 10s

You will, chief inspector, have already received numerous reports, with accompanying photographic evidence, pertaining to a disturbance in Regent's Park in the early hours of the morning. These will have conveyed to you the details of the case at greater length and with greater accuracy than I could hope to do here. The purpose of this report is not to restate but to provide a free account, inasmuch as I am able, of my discovery of the crime, which I have permitted to stand as it suggested itself to me with little modification. The act was, it seems evident, performative; it strikes me accordingly that an audience's account may aid us in grasping its intended effect, and in identifying the wider intent of our unknown malefactor.

Officer James and I were conducting a routine patrol of the park's Outer Circle at 0512 hours when we remarked upon a sharp and audibly male scream emanating from what appeared to be the Open Air Theatre. We proceeded towards it at speed, crossing the Boating Lake by way of the small bridge some way southwest of the Botany Building. As we did so we encountered and questioned a male in his late forties. He was caucasian, dressed in a worn and sweat-stained tracksuit, had thinning brown hair, and was stumbling with all haste away from the Triton Fountain, which we ascertained from him to be the scene of the disturbance. He was incoherent and breathless and we could obtain little further information from him; I dispatched him with Officer James to Kentish Town station to be restored and kept for more extensive questioning. I then proceeded to the Fountain to conduct a preliminary survey of the scene before calling for assistance should doing so transpire to be necessary.

Approaching the fountain by its westernmost pathway I could initially discern nothing amiss. I arrived at the scene at 0542 and the sun had not yet risen; no others, contrary to the impression our witness had given us, were present; wooden seating was undisturbed, as were surrounding grass and foliage. Upon closer inspection, however, I detected some oddities in the movement of the fountain's water and advanced with torch lit to investigate. The liquid situated in the fountain's basin was almost entirely still, barely rippled even where struck by descending spray. Directing my torch into the pool I saw my face reflected with a startling clarity. In the whiteness of the light it assumed a statuesque definition, caught and held fast by a medium that had none of water's accustomed changeability. I too was caught, compelled, momentarily, to stillness, and to admire how well a canvas of red, deep and rich, set off the brittle pallor of features that in daylight seem so stiff, so sickly. It was only then that I remarked upon the colour of the substance before me. The water had, indeed, turned an opaque red, obscuring the fountain's stone bottom entirely from view.

Had I to make an estimation as to how long I had been examining my reflection when the sun began to rise I would have hazarded no longer than five minutes; but I observed, shaken by the light, that it was 0614, and that near half an hour had passed me by. Raising my head I restrained conjecture as to what transformation the fountain-water might have undergone, determining now to examine the sculpture set in the centre of the pool. It was immediately evident that it had in some manner been altered. Its deteriorating bronze did not, as was its custom, catch the light: there was only an impassive white, smooth, flawless, and shadowless. My eye was drawn to Triton's outstretched arm. The gesture has struck me walking past it during prior patrols as welcoming: the sea-god blows upon his conch to raise the waves, so that they may flow with vigour as comrades at his side. Yet the nails of his hand are now lengthened and sharpened, their fingers reaching inwards for a palm pallid and cold: they deny the dawn purchase; this new sign, it is contempt for the marring darkness that is the price of light and defiance in the face of its strength, and I cannot but marvel at the magnanimity that it bespeaks, at the haughty majesty of the heart that would abjure our kind sun to spit in the

face of its gentle toll. His face too is corpse-white, rock unliving and unmoving. But there is life in his eyes, soft eyes, moist eyes, stained a bright and perilous red. I strain to see into them, but they will not look upon me, fixed upon the rising light in the east with a malevolence that seethes from within its chill shell of stone. From his mouth, slowly, leaps a sluggish stream; to this, now, my eyes are drawn, and I follow it to its point of termination in a heavy spray that fills and colours the inscription at the basin's southern rim.

To this I next made my way. There was, I saw, little trace of the original dedication; a Latin couplet had been set in its place. I record what I read, and my attempt at a translation:

LENTE·LAETE·MI·LICET·EXHALASSE·BEATAM
LEVIBUS·ARTEM·CUM·SUSPICIAM·IN·LABELLIS

Slowly, joyously may I exhale, looking up
at blessed skill, in lipplines smooth.

I did not test how the sculpture's three mouths felt to the touch, though I was drawn to. Their lips did not seem small to me, but full and plump, quite free of bite or blemish.

I broke away, after another half-hour, to summon Officer James and a team from Kentish Town. Thus concludes my account. If I may, chief inspector, I wish to reaffirm to you my commitment to this case, and to request that you continue to trust in my ability to conduct it to its successful resolution. We have made little progress as yet. But little time, as yet, has passed; and somehow it calls to me.

* * *

20.03.98

Twenty-two hrs. & fifteen fine mins.

Past The Clock

Dearest diary – flirtatious – fiery –
it'll ever be you that suffers by me:
now hold my head with smooth white hands –
entomb my worries, in their bands.

invocatione completa verum incipere debemus! And there is, I fear, quite the host of happenstance to report. 'T has been – yea, freely shall I own it – a day chock-full of choice situation.

Some developments to report, to begin with beginnings, so far as the reporters' favourite Egregious Exhibition is concerned. Not, however, very promising. As doubtless has been set down somewhere elsewhere by some great personage *summo ingenio*, etc., &c., sever the head from one company of questions only to see it sprout two more: we were able to riddle the riddle of the oversized runner's silence ('twas as ever, diary dear, my looping lullabies that were deployed to oil his creaking casket), and to tease from him report of three *other* witnesses (potential) that

he had briefly spied stone-drunk upon a bench, in the prosecution of his torturous circuit about our much beloved gardens *parthénogénétique*: which, however, let it be remembered, are (potential) witnesses, as Owen has with painful consistency proclaimed to me across the course of the day; for they are vanished, evanesced, nowhere to be found; figuratively, forensically, or in the flesh. To – forgive me, dear D., my sweet hunter-out of inserenities – complicate matters further, enquiries, cunningly conceived by my proud partner, have revealed that a scholastic delegation (whose nation of origin, fear not, unseen watchers, I shall forbear to unveil), billeted at the Landmark of all places, have shedded three of their company of hapless youths; a matter for some worry, it might fairly be thought; though clearly enough no report would have been made had we not sought out their keepers, and even as we spoke we seemed to interest them remarkably little. Maybe Owen is to blame after all – he has, however eloquently, needled, he may insist otherwise, never been the most prepossessing of speakers – but – if I must be honest – I suspect a failure in safeguarding protocols that I simply haven't the time nor vim to dig through my toolbox to fix.

Poor Owen. I fear for him. (No. Not really. Come now). He does take things rather too seriously. I indulge in no admissible act of over-throwing when I write that a sharp-eyed man could tell just by looking at him that he is engaged upon a case. Engaged! Nay, wed already, and raring for the consummation. He paces about his office with the regularity of my old patriarch's grandfather-clock – I shall not complain – no, I shall not – nine long hours for two short lines, let it be known, yet I cry forth no *querellam* – and runs his hands one across the other with a feverish abandon. To converse with him now is quite impossible; we do not share speech; I tell him all that my efforts have uncovered, and he treats the table between our two seats to a glare at once absent and predatory, a dull fire smouldering in eyes, fastened upon something that I cannot see. I dare not, of course, suggest that he sleep, or (heaven forbid!) take a day's rest: the two of us have been lashed along with nary an hour's respite since last week's gift of *cannibalisme au musée*, but as he is wont to whisper to me, or to the air about me,

"It is on obsession that I subsist, Wilfred,"

and it cannot, I confess, be denied that his peculiar brand of masochism can boast of victory upon many a forgotten field.

What else? Family well. Wife gets rather jittery without me, as you know – convinced, when she flung open the doors for me, that rats had laired under our bed. Told her it was a wild goose chase; her eyes inflated (outwards, if you comprehend, as well as in the usual directions; those being up, down, and out, too, to either side) and she commenced shrieking on feathers and faeces. Took some time to explain that I had merely, and perhaps unwisely, indulged in a figure of speech. Daughter as ever very studious and eager to recount to me the shortcomings of her comrades-in-learning; presentations, she says, given *mane* on French verbs, and she was amused to observe that a good half are yet fuddled by their itses. Son glassy-eyed and proclaiming undying love to an nameless enigma;

sealed, no doubt, upstairs at this very instant, seething over dactyls and spondees. Keep clear, diary dear, keep clear; for heartless are those antique feet and cruel. One step further – brother called today to announce his promotion; now district manager, and with chest, I should say, audibly swelled – but I'll no more. Extended relations, after all: such a bore.

I realise, good friend, that I've yet to feed you your titillating tidbit for the day. Nothing salacious, I'm afraid, but toddling along to pick up Owen from *Please Call Me Izzy* I was treated to a little head-to-head that you will, I'm sure, find just as sweet. As I leaned, head down, against the clement wall, eyes wistfully contemplating a tarnished mote of gum, a young fellow materialised beside me; he drew my gaze, elsewhere entrapped as it was, on account of a *very* stylish old umbrella, coloured a princely – nay, a regal purple. *Please Call Me Izzy*, bless her perfumed soul, was, as Owen later apprised me, pontificating with all accustomed rapture; unwilling to incur her wrath by interruption, and rendered reckless by the length of my wait, I remarked upon its fineness, and he turned to look me full in the face. 'Twas a lovely visage, as if forged from a fairy-tale: snow-white skin, blood-red curls, and piercing blue eyes. But it was somehow distant – static, perhaps, comes closer to cracking the old nail on the head: technically flawless, but too cold to thrill. He smiled at me, in all his serene regality, and said, in a strange intonation that I couldn't quite place:

"I thank you. Forgive me. I bear a gift that calls for delivery."

And off he went. Odd fellow. Odd way of talking. And a broolly that really was rather special. Thought a second of following – still had hopes of asking his supplier – but Owen materialised and that, *u.d.*, was that.

So, too, so far as goes for me and you, tonight – and off with the light – dearest dear D. Tomorrow, then – bye, bye bye, bye bye –

Yours, loving, and dreadfully, desperately dependent,

Wilfred. M. James

* * *

24/03/98
2308 hours

Transcript: Colloquy of the Superintendent and his leal servant, the Chief Inspector. With intent to...

Su. Damn it all, Sam, you know we haven't the time for bells and whistles.

CI. Yes. Quite. My apologies.

Su. (sigh)

Su. A very taxing day it's been today, Sam; very taxing.

CI. No doubt.

Su. So many calls, you know, and so much dashed conversation. You know, Sam, how I deplore conversation.

CI. I am indeed, superintendent, very well aware.

Su. I deplore it, Sam, not, you see, because it bores me, though really it bores me a great deal; I deplore it because it means work. Work that usually ends up messy. And there's no messier work than work that comes from you.

CI. You know, superintendent, how keenly I strive to keep a clean house.

Su. But sometimes you just can't, not for the life of you. Some dust just sticks too thick. And then you come to me. And then I've got no choice but to sit and listen. (armchair creaks). I'd do best, I suppose, to take it like a man. Come along then. Have at it!

CI. First on the register: a development in the Case of the Sanguine Statue.

Su. Dear God, is that what they're calling it now?

CI. Regretfully so. I'd suspect that the bloodwater's behind it.

(pause)

Su. My apologies. Continue.

CI. We've found the missing witnesses.

(pause)

Su. Elaborate, chief inspector, if you will.

CI. We've been looking these past few days everywhere we could think of around the fountain, but we never thought to look in it.

Su. And whence, I wonder, fell this newest and finest star of inspiration?

CI. The detective I put in charge of the case had the idea, though I couldn't tell you where he got it from. He's certainly not in any mood to. Anyway, we cracked open Triton and his concubines and found a really quite -

Su. Yes, Sam, that'll do, that'll do. I'll save my ogling for the reports if it's all the same to you. (armchair creaks) Next item. I demand it.

CI. Another murder - style the same -

and right, if you'll permit the expression, under our very noses.

(pause)

Su. (sniff) Meaning?

CI. One of those psychiatrists you hired because we were running a surplus and you didn't -

Su. Relevance, Sam! Relevance!

CI. Well, she's stone-dead - and stone-skinned, too, for that matter. A bit different to the last time, of course, since she wasn't a statue to begin with. Rather too animated, in fact, if the accounts of some of my subordinates are to be believed.

Su. Point taken, chief inspector. Point taken.

CI. A nasty piece of work, as one says. Sharp nails, sharp shoes, sharp teeth, sharp hair -

Su. Sharp hair?

CI. I tried touching it. It -

Su. Proceed, Sam, proceed.

CI. Very pale skin. She'd been artfully arranged on her Easy-Chair, and was peering from the window into the sky. Legs crossed, nail of the right first finger just brushing her chin. Alluring. But mocking. Those enigmatic sunglasses of hers now literally stuck to her face. You know, it's odd, but it strikes me that very little about her actually -

Su. An observation, I think, Sam, for another time and another place. I trust you've kept this one out of the papers?

CI. She's pretty well known, but we managed to muddle things a bit. Put the word out about drugs. She had a real penchant for them, you know. Quite the collection that I found in her safe.

Su. A yacht. Next time I'll buy myself a thumping great yacht. I'll even bring you along for a ride or two.

(sighs)

Su. Any advances as yet?

CI. Yes, as it happens. In fact, that's why I'm here.

Su. Spill the beans then.

CI. I'll have you know that I wouldn't have bothered you otherwise.

Su. Note me as "notus". Now, onwards!

CI. Yes, superintendent. That canny inspector of mine - you know, the one who -

Su. I know, I know.

CI. Yes, well, he remarked upon the fact that over the past week we've had three crimes in short succession take place in areas, when strung together on a map, that form a rough triangle.

Su. The Park, the psychiatrist, and - the Museum? Where did poor Izzy live again?

CI. Claremont Square, superintendent. We met her there when you hired her.

Su. Ah. Yes.

(pause)

Su. But how does your man figure a connection between the Museum and the rest of it? The Park and Izzy, they share a distinctive method; but the affair at the Museum was - well, it was barbaric; that's what it was.

CI. Owen observes that the Museum is at the apex of his proposed triangle. He infers from this that the difference in *modus operandi* is to be expected. Crimes on parallel planes, he says, merit parallel methods.

Su. Hmm.

CI. No, I'm not convinced either. But he predicts a fourth murder on Sunday somewhere in the vicinity of Market Estate. Time as we've had an interval of four days between each crime so far; place based on where the murderer would need to go to complete a putative square of bloodshed.

Su. Ah! Geometry, the old bastard. But we've not the slightest idea - even if we take your man at his word - who the target might be?

CI. No. We still don't know why Izzy or the other three had to die, after all. But let me stress that we've really nothing else to go on. Why not send over a few fellows, at least, on Sunday night with Owen and Constable James? Don't look at me like that. I know

you've got the resources.

Su. (harrumphing). Not much of an advance.

(pause)

Su. Well, alright. What harm can come of it, after all?

CI. Perhaps they'll die horribly.

Su. But we won't be there to watch, will we?

(laughter)

CI. No, superintendent. I suppose not.

* * *

A rich midnight for Sunday's night, full night, vibrant night. A fat moon in the sky, harsh light, bloated white. A world of two colours, a photograph that the detectives enter with their men, the air uncommonly chill for spring, still, forbearing to fill their hair.

"Owen, old chap, I think we're there," quoth sweet bondsman James. It's on North Road that they're standing, shops shut at their sides, lamps muffled in landings; a sign-riddled gate before them, tied shut for the night. From the inspector, glint-eyed, no reply, for onwards he strides, climbs up and over petty metal; off and away he goes, in line unmarred, to the old tower, where, ahh, he knows...

His comrades follow, now all a-shiver - from cold, or the inclement dark? - uncertain, slow. Hark: on leaves that oddly murmur, fevered orbs mark silent watchers on the watch, in lavish feathers cloaked and coated, serenely singing from the shade. Round they throw their baleful eyes, to mingle with full-throated voices - no words to sing, but most haunting music: to lace the wills of meandering men.

Lowly, lithely, through the grass they slither, stone-kissed arms with wicked grips: creep, quiet, across speechless ground, caressing booted socks and sock-kept feet; crush, quiet, loving, frail bone, and bear away warm bodies to fleeting homes. Relish the while, the thrill of their throes; savour the sweetness of unheard screams, unseen entreaties made alone. Stoop softly, slowly, to throats exposed - feel their rough and frantic beat - and lay upon them, on their lovely heat, alabastrine fangs and sinuous tongue; pierce, and feed deep, deep upon that peerless wine, till not a drop be left for questing flesh to find.

But the bold detective, on he glides; for little he knows, or cares, for the thinning flock behind. There is a pale fire in

his eyes: no heed he pays to distant shouts that quickly fade into the night, but mounts, again, an iron gate, reaching for an oaken door. Above, the clock stills, no more to move nor chime: it awaits the newcomer, forgetting time, free, briefly, from the weary law of hours.

Bondsman James, he turns, burning light, lamp in left hand, stern silver-lock in right; bushes rustle; white arm he spies, takes aim, fires; exults to hear the hiss of bodiless mist. Heart a-pumping, hands a-shaking, "Owen, old chap!" he cries. "We've hope yet, I think; they fall, foul night-things, to true-tested silver as well as any horror of the dark." But the dark laughs, for Owen answers not: his feet alone, their hard echo, meet his ears as he climbs. James falters, fear burrowing through fey joy: loosens his gaze, looks not up, though furtive statuary poises above; sees not the fineness of its robes, the depth of its curls as it leaps, seeking young shoulders, cold wings unfurled, with talons grim and old.

The second floor welcomes the climber, and the city's

MURDER AT TWENTY THOUSAND FEET

Buck Blake, Sughey, Thomas Elvin, Dan Scott, Sarah, Simon Canniffe, Mr <Tom>ble, Phoebe Fay, Maya, Alex Colesmith
CW: Implied sexual content

The beginning of our journey aboard the *S.S. Amity*, at least, was rather amenable.

After the great kerfuffle of the boarding ceremony, involving several champagne bottles, a great deal of inebriated birthday exclamations and at least one airborne present that hit the hull with a disturbing amount of force just inches from Prince Earnest's head, we quickly boarded. After watching at the window as the great airship hoisted itself up into the sky, London disappearing into cloud far below us, Mr Delagney and I retired to our respective quarters to unpack our bags before reconvening in the corridor.

"Well, this ship really is quite something," I said. "Four-poster beds, a working en-suite toilet... what next, an onboard spa?"

Mr Delagney smiled. "Actually, Dwyer, I hear the spa's only in operation every other day of the voyage. What did you think of the boarding ceremony?"

"It was marvellously grand, but ultimately it was all unnecessary commotion. I suppose everything is when it comes to royalty. And... now, come to think of it, the captain was awfully late showing up. You'd think a man like him would be a tad more punctual."

Mr Delagney's eyes twinkled. "Precisely, my dear Dwyer. *Precisely*. Now, let us to the drawing room. We have mingling to do!" I agreed heartily, and we set off.

sounds cease. The third floor beckons him on; the building shuts its mouth. The fourth stretches before him; shoes fall silent. The fifth he enters, and there he stands, before him: a regnant shadow etched upon the brittle face of the moon, eyes absent furnaces, the harsh blue of distant stars startling in a face carved in black and white. He smiles, stretching forth a hand of old stone, and says,

"Come, dear one. The city is before us. Far is time at this still point between the darkness and the dawn. Sweet music shall we make this night, while the world rests from turning."

Heart surges, head spins; horror grasps the disciple, and he strains to feel for the gun of new silver at his belt. He stumbles forwards, but trips; falls, and then kneels, for

he cannot force from weary mind
the tranquil twinkle of those eyes.

It took us a while.

The *Amity* proved to be quite a maze, and we spent the best part of half an hour searching for a member of staff to show us to the drawing room, even with Mr Delagney's remarkable sense of direction. By the time we made it there, the other passengers were already making their way into the dining room.

Prince Earnest, of course, had a place at the very head of the table, giving him a good view of his guests: Britain's greatest minds. Its most incredible entertainers. And its deepest pockets. All the Prince's favourites, gathered here to celebrate his birthday, whether we knew him well beforehand or not.

What a truly bizarre collection of people this was, I thought to myself as Mr Delagney and I sat ourselves down between Ms Jain Clancy, the genius at the forefront of modern clockwork technology, and Mr Basil Theodore, the owner of Theodore & Sons.

"You must be Mr Dwyer, am I correct?" said Ms Clancy. "Then that would make your friend here the great detective himself, Mr Delagney! It is a pleasure to meet you both. Mr Dwyer, your accounts of Mr Delagney's cases are most excellent."

"Thank you," I said, quite graciously.

"And Mr Delagney," she continued. "We simply must sit down for a long chat sometime. There is much I would like

to pick your brains on.”

“I greatly admire your works too, Ms Clancy,” I said. “I read an article in *The Monocle* recently, about the clockwork bipeds you unveiled recently. Fascinating stuff!”

Prince Earnest stood and tapped a spoon against his glass, and we all fell silent.

“It is with great pleasure,” said the prince, “that I welcome you all aboard my airship, the *Amity*, to celebrate my twenty-seventh birthday. As heir to our great country, it is my duty to ensure a bright, prosperous future for Britain, and all of her citizens.

“A country cannot thrive without change. Innovation. Invention. *Creativity*, in *all* things. And that, my friends, is why I have chosen you all to join me here—”

It was at that moment that the lights in the room shut off, leaving us in pitch darkness. Godforsaken electricity.

“Well, urh,” said the prince. “This wasn’t in the schedule. O’Connell, fetch me a candle—”

Thunk!

“Argh!”

The lights flickered back on, and a crossbow bolt was protruding from Prince Earnest’s neck. He slowly toppled over, landing face down on his bread and butter starter. I glanced at Mr Delagney. Someone screamed.

“There is a murderer among us.” Delagney’s chilling words echoed through the great dining hall. There was silence as everyone tried to grasp the situation. The Prince was dead. And they were hundreds of miles out over the Atlantic ocean. They were alone and three hours away from the nearest shores. Three hours with a killer on the loose.

“Well at least the murderer can’t get away.” I remarked. Delagney and I had been investigating the scene. The crossbow bolt, crystal tipped and made of brass, was extracted from the corpse. It was a rare type, manufactured briefly during the Regency era. They were ultimately outlawed; no steel armour or even stone wall could stop it. There were only three manufacturers of this weapon: Blight Industries, Sindian Ltd. and Theodore & Sons. Sindian Ltd. had collapsed decades ago when Lord Sindian failed to have an heir. Blight Industries was state-owned, the Prince himself owning a large share. That left Theodore & Sons.

“So you think Mr Basil Theodore is our best lead?” Delagney asked. He liked to question my rationale and thought process.

“With no other clues, he is our only option. Unless you have uncovered something that I haven’t?”

“All I ask is that you keep an open mind and not jump to conclusions. But if you wish to pursue this, I recommend you bring Ms Clancy with you,” Delagney added.

“ME?” Ms Clancy exclaimed.

“Yes. Your fancy schmancy clockwork mechanism that allows that thing to fire ten rounds per second? It’s a masterpiece. I’m sure you’ve always wanted an opportunity to

test it out.” Delagney pointed towards the revolver that she carried around for self-defence. “Try not to die.”

I gulped. Ms Clancy didn’t seem like the type who knew how to use it, even if she invented the thing. These next three hours would be the longest three hours of my life...

As prescribed, the eldest of the Theodore clan quickly found himself in the hot seat. Pressed into the leather throne, the barrage began:

“Recognise this most deadly bolt sir? It’s been a couple aeons since I saw its kin, but you’d know its origin better than I would,” the detective monologued. “Weapons merchants never bring good things; at least Ms Clancy makes interesting weapons. You couldn’t even kill them in a fun way, could you?”

However brilliant his mind, I have my doubts anyone has ever called Delagney rational, I pondered, though the prince wasn’t one to invite a boring detective.

Upon eventual respite from the attack, the defendant retorted,

“Mr Delagney, you know as well as I do that these bolts left circulation when I was only a lad. And, not that you’ll believe me, ours were made of only finest black iron,” he smirked. “I remind you, unlike some, I am here as a friend of our dearly departed prince. Not entertainment.”

His eyes pierced me with that last line but I knew better than to introduce face to hull there and then.

Sir Theodore saw himself out. “Looks like this one’s gone icy,” mullered Delagney, losing hope for a simple case.

“The Captain sure was late to the party,” mused Ms Clancy, new to nonmechanical reasoning. “We could... frame—”

“—retrace his steps, brilliant my lady. You are a natural investigator,” I recovered.

As we meandered our way through the behemoth airship towards the control room, I had plenty of time to ponder the absurdity of the situation that had unfolded in the dining room. Save for one rather unremarkable scream, there had been strikingly little commotion or clamour upon the Prince’s untimely demise. One might reasonably expect at least a minor kerfuffle to ensue when your country’s ruling heir suddenly collapses dead on his dinner roll, a bolt protruding most ungraciously from his larynx. Instead, the scene had been greeted with a quite curious level of calm.

Were these party guests, many of them holdovers from a less stable time marked with many a cutthroat assassination (if you’ll pardon the pun), so desensitised to this senseless brutality that it hardly stirred even a hair to rise on their necks? Or perhaps these high society folk were simply so cold-blooded that witnessing death was just another trifling event to move past while pursuing greater grandeur. Or was there something deeper, that a room full of guests could remain in such relative calm in the midst of a killing?

At long last, we approached the bridge of the *Amity*. Quite an ironic name, given the circumstances, I thought to my-

self. Upon entering the control room, we found the Captain dishevelled and out of breath, as if he'd just finished a two furlong sprint. Even so visibly unkempt, the man was, I must observe, exceptionally attractive.

"Captain...?" I queried.

"What in the—" he wheezed, his chest heaving like a forge bellows, "bloody blazes is—" another wheeze, "going on on my ship?!" He bent over a console, clutching its edges for support as he took a series of heavy breaths. "I've just been given news that Earnest was murdered."

Earnest? A rather familiar way of addressing your country's (late) prince, I'd say.

"Just been given news?" Delagney asked, pointedly. "News must travel slowly in this airship of yours, Captain. Between our brief interrogations in the dining room and our trek to the bridge, I'd say nearly an hour has passed since the Prince had a bolt shot through his throat."

The Captain let out a wail of anguish. Now *this* is a more fitting response I'd have found appropriate at the scene of the crime.

"Not his precious throat!" he cried.

Erm, I retract my former comment. Perhaps not the appropriate response I had just characterised. What a strange collection of people gathered on this ship today...

Delagney continued his probe, "Captain...?" he trailed off, searchingly.

"Ayer," the Captain offered. "Amadeus Ayer."

Mr Delagney cocked his head at the name, his brows raised in curiosity. He looked as though he had registered something which eluded me. "Captain Ayer," he continued with the faintest hint of a grin, "how is it that you have only just received news of the Prince's death?"

Ms Clancy shuffled uncertainly next to me, clearly unsure of her position accompanying myself and the detective.

Captain Ayer, having finally collected himself and caught his breath at least partly, replied, "That little power outage we had earlier... It originated from a major fault in the communications system. The whole thing's gone dead, no comms on the *Amity*, inside or out! One of my crew only just got me the message."

"I see," said Mr Delagney.

"And why, I might ask, were you so out of breath on our arrival?" I questioned the Captain. "I would have assumed your presence in the bridge this whole time. These airships are, to my understanding, temperamental at best, and their control needs constant attendance. And yet you looked to have run a marathon when we arrived."

Captain Ayer fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable with the question. "Well..." He hesitated, but I allowed him the time to respond further. "It's rather embarrassing you see. I..." More hesitation. "I am prone to panic attacks and they set my heart racing. When I got news of Earnest's death,—"

I once again noted his referring to the Prince so plainly...

"—it triggered a panic attack worse than I've had in years."

"Indeed..." said Mr Delagney, inquisitively.

Well, that might explain his wheezing breath, but his appearance? The dishevelled hair? And his Captain's uniform I had quickly noted to be misbuttoned? Mmmmm...

I stepped forward, meaning to enquire along this very line, but before I could pose a question, Mr Delagney spoke.

"That is all, Captain Amadeus Ayer." Again, that slight grin at the Captain's name. What had that detective caught onto that I hadn't? "Could you kindly direct us to the Prince's quarters?"

The Captain seemed shocked that his interrogation was already finished, and I saw relief in his eyes. He spoke with much greater ease as he said, "Simply retrace your steps back to the dining room. The Prince's quarters are adjacent, between the dining room and the spa. Here, you'll need a key." He pulled a jewelled golden key from his breast pocket.

"Thank you," said the detective. He turned, beckoning myself and Ms Clancy to leave as well. "I am sorry for your loss."

I glanced over my shoulder as we departed, just barely discerning a pitiable look on the Captain's face.

Ms Clancy trotted after us. "Mr Delagney, Mr Dwyer," she huffed. "Why are you not interrogating him further? That man looked as if he'd just run stem to stern! I would think it quite obvious that he was *not* in the bridge when our dearest Prince was murdered. Panic attacks my rear end! Far more likely on the opposite end of the airship, perhaps even in the dining room itself, I dare say!"

I'd have offered an explanation, but I was just as perplexed as she was. The detective had clearly put something together which I had not. This wasn't altogether uncommon. I consider myself quite quick and can usually follow, I suppose why Mr Delagney allows me to accompany him, but sometimes that man is much more discerning than I.

"Oh, I think you're right," the detective said with a hint of amusement. "But perhaps not for the right reasons."

We made our long trudge through the airship, back towards the dining room. As we passed the spa, I saw its door ever so faintly ajar. Strange, as I thought it closed until tomorrow. Perhaps I read the itinerary wrong.

"Here we are," Mr Delagney said as we approached an ornate pair of double doors. "The master suite." With a turn of the key and a satisfying click, the lock unfastened.

As the detective threw the doors open, my eyes widened in shock. It was not the splendour of the quarters that struck me, though it was certainly decorated to the point of awe. No, it was the absolute *state* of the room which had me falter; the place was an absolute chaotic mess.

Ms Clancy gasped audibly. "It's been ransacked!" she blurted out. I tended to agree with her assessment.

"Perhaps," the detective said. He seemed the only one

unfazed by the room's condition. "And..." he looked around the room, taking every detail in. "Perhaps not," he crooned slyly.

"Perhaps not?! Look at this mess!" Ms Clancy shouted. "It looks like a bomb's gone off!"

Mr Delagney let out a chuffle. My mind was still sprinting forward, trying to catch up to the detective's. I hated these moments, when I felt so left behind by what was plainly obvious to him.

"Mr Dwyer, the torch please."

I hesitated. "The torch? But the room is so brightly lit. Why on earth—"

"The other torch," said the detective. "And turn the lights off."

Finally, at long last, it was all starting to click in my head. Like a clockwork machine which had just been oiled, the gears in my head had finally begun to whirl into motion. I looked closer at the scene before me. The straps on the columns of the four-poster bed. The two light fittings on the wall cocked inwardly at odd angles. Pillows on the rug. The rug's upturned edges. The centre table with its contents strewn across the floor. Wallpaper in the corner, scratched and tattered. The off-centre dresser, drawers ajar, scuff marks on the floor beneath its legs. A large wardrobe with its doors wide open and clothes widely parted to either side from their hanging rod above. A belt draping from the antlers of the wall-mounted stag head. The *odour*. And a variety of conspicuous objects which—

"The lights, Mr Dwyer."

I cleared my throat sheepishly. "Ah, er, right."

I handed the detective the torch and flicked off the lights. With a click, the detective lit the room with the purple beam of the torch. I couldn't help myself but to fidget like an awkward schoolboy. The room was absolutely *glistening* in the torch's light.

Ms Clancy beside me let out a most prolonged gasp, clutching at the string of pearls around her neck. The detective clicked off the torch and moved to close the doors behind us, ushering Ms Clancy into the hall, her mouth still gaping.

"It seems," said the detective, "that our royal host had been enjoying some company shortly before dinner. And, by the sheer volume, I posit the emissions of the room would most befittingly suggest the Prince and another... Stag."

The detective chuckled at his own joke. "I dare say that our so appropriately named Captain was not the one to murder his dearest Earnest."

"So if it's not Mr Basil Theodore, and not the Captain, who could it be?" I wondered aloud. "We should find the crossbow. We should speak with the crew, and find out what may have caused this suspiciously inconvenient power outage. And we should get our hands on the passenger- and crew-lists to know all our suspects."

"All marvellous ideas. Let's go to the communication room

first," said the detective. "I'm sure there will be people there that could help us with both the power outage and the passenger-lists. About the crossbow... Well, we'll see about that after."

The three of us set out, wandering through the empty corridors, but before we reached the communication room, a member of crew came running towards us.

Panting, he held up his hand. "Thank the Gods! I found you. Mr Detective, please, come! Now!" Without any further explanation, he turned around and bolted away.

I exchanged a confused glance with Ms Clancy, but when I turned back to Mr Delagney, he was already halfway down the corridor hurrying after the crewmember.

Ms Clancy took a deep breath, grabbed her skirts and pulled them up slightly, thereby allowing her to run surprisingly swiftly after the two men. With a sigh, I followed the others.

We reached the dining hall in mere minutes.

"Look!" panted the crewmember. "Look over here!" He stood next to a few other shipmates and a few passengers, waving his arms about to get our attention and then pointing. They all made space for us to see what the commotion was about. I must admit, it took me an embarrassingly long time to notice, but Delagney's keenly trained eyes spotted it right away. The prince's corpse was still there, splayed back against his chair, but on the pinky finger of his otherwise blood-drenched left hand, there was a band of pristine, untouched skin. Someone had stolen the prince's signet ring! But why? What could anyone stand to gain from stealing a simple piece of jewellery? And what was the point of committing murder to do what could so easily be accomplished by simple sleight of hand?

Delagney, true to form, did not let this unexpected development throw him off his game. He promptly began interviewing Theodore, the first to notice the ring's absence, leaving Clancy and myself to calm some of the more hysterical guests.

"Terrible, just terrible," choked Eliza, the royal accountant. "I told him this cruise was a bad idea."

"You thought something like this would happen?" asked Clancy.

"Well, no, not exactly – but it is a ridiculous waste of money, even with the Blight deal about to go through."

Putting aside the bizarre priorities of the prince's pencil pusher for a moment, I pushed for more information.

"The Blight deal?"

"I shouldn't tell you this, but I suppose it is about to come out anyway. His royal highness has been far too enthusiastic with his spending of late, and the treasury simply cannot take the strain. I advised that he sell off a few of our less profitable investments, Blight Industries among them, and after many, shall we say, *heated*, discussions on the matter, he was ready to go through with it. The plan was to send off the paperwork once this cruise finished."

This appeared to be the first solid motive for this crime, and I knew I must continue on this thread.

"I assume that Baroness Wendy Blight was not too pleased with this?" I inquired.

"Of course not!" she retorted. "Wendy has always been a lover of comfort and reliability, and she hates the idea of the uncertain world of privatisation."

It seemed to me that Baroness Blight may have been more sensible than I previously thought. But there it was again, another passenger referring to a powerful figure in such a familiar way. I felt out of place on this cruise ship, a true display of scientific progress and hedonistic grandeur. Keeping a mental note to follow up on this relation between Eliza and Baroness Blight, I pressed on with obtaining hard evidence.

"Eliza, you wouldn't happen to still have these Blight deal papers perchance?"

"Oh, yes. They're just in my quarters."

As Eliza dashed off to fetch the papers, Delagney returned from questioning Theodore.

"Well Mr Theodore didn't take the ring," Delagney said, with his eyes drooping down before shooting back up as he added, "but that doesn't mean he wouldn't! I am certain he has done something similar in the past. Any news from the accountant?"

As if summoned, Eliza returned with the papers.

"Here they are," said Eliza, first handing them to Ms Clancy before they were passed between all of us to observe. It seemed Eliza had been true to her word, everything in the deal had been finalised except for the blank signature line at the bottom. Delagney, of course, pieced everything together very quickly.

"A deal requiring a signature from a specific person on a specific day? This all seems rather too convenient. Tell me..." Delagney looked blankly at Eliza.

"Eliza," she replied, saving him from his embarrassment.

"Tell me Eliza, whose idea was it to delay the signing of these papers to the day of the cruise rather than simply sign it promptly?"

"Oh..." she began, glancing downwards. "That would have been me."

"And when were they scheduled to be signed?"

"It would have been about now."

"A few hours after the prince's death," said Delagney. "What prompted you to push for the deal to be pushed to today?"

"Well, you know how many good connections, with deep pockets, that one might find at the party. I was hoping that some good diplomacy could result in the deal being dropped. The Baroness and I were just about to broach the subject with the prince's financiers when it happened."

"Murder, of course, is a quick way to assure the deal is

never signed."

"Well, I suppose. But you're not accusing me of killing the prince! It would hardly be good for business."

Her priorities are truly something to behold. Though it was true, murdering your way out of deals is not a good look.

"Very well. Have a good day," said the detective. He walked at a deliberate pace, with a hand on his chin, apparently thinking it over.

"The thing I still don't get is," Ms. Clancy said, "where is the crossbow? I suppose whoever fired it must have already thrown it in the sea or something."

"Indeed. I doubt we have a chance of finding it now, but it is curious that a crossbow would be allowed on board. Do you have the list of crew, Mr. Dwyer?"

"Here," I said, handing him the list.

"Then it is time to check in on security. A misnomer," he chuckled, "given today's events." That is certainly one way of putting it. As luck would have it, the head watchman was walking towards us in haste. She was a stout woman with a stern expression. Whatever she was feeling, it was difficult to tell with any degree of certainty.

"I know what you're thinking, but I wasn't slipped anything to keep things quiet," she said, anticipating Mr. Delagney's line of questioning. "I keep a tight ship, and we dutifully checked everyone's luggage, including yours... apart from the Prince's own."

"So you're saying he was killed by his own weapon?"

"Well, I didn't see anyone bring it on board, and the Prince's belongings weren't searched so, yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"And who has access to the prince's room?"

"There is a key for the Prince, and usually the cleaners but they were told not to clean until after the party was over so that key hasn't moved, and the prince's wife."

"The Duchess!" Ms. Clancy and I exclaimed.

Mr Delagney nodded. "Indeed. We have a motive, do we not, if the Prince was engaging in frolics with the captain? A spurned wife... jealousy is a terrible thing, Ms Clancy. This entire case could be no more than a rather unpleasant domestic matter."

"It could," she admitted. "Though you may be reading a little much into this. It has always been a marriage of convenience, nothing more."

Delagney eyed her shrewdly for a while, but made no comment. I was left, as usual, to pick up the conversation.

"Have we examined why the lights went out? That struck me as altogether too convenient."

"Indeed." Delagney pounced on this opportunity. "To the generator!"

"To the generator!" chorused a few of the more shell-shocked partygoers, mistaking this for a toast. Delagney ignored them and dashed off.

By the time Ms Clancy and I caught up with him, he was most of the way through questioning the rubber-suited guard. The whirr of the dynamo was almost deafening; I had to strain to make out the fellow's answers.

"No, sir. Not a living soul came through here. And you can arrest me for that if you want, but I don't know why I'd want to switch off this here generator, sir. It's my life's work, minding this, and not for love nor money could you part me from it."

"Understood, understood." Mr Delagney peered over the front of the guard's clipboard at the records, and gave a small smile. "You are precisely correct, of course. Might I just look through the hatch... yes, thank you, thank you. Just as I thought. Such a mess in there."

Without giving the horrified guard a chance to respond, he strode away again, gripping my shoulder in one hand and Ms Clancy's in the other. He had a surprisingly strong pinch, and we were unable to resist being dragged along. "I have all the information I need now. Capital. Capital."

The hum of the airship's turbines sounded below us. I looked down from the narrow metal gantry we were on into the very bowels of the ship.

"Delagney," I pointed out, "this is not the way we came."

"It isn't." There was a sharp click to my right, similar in tone to the *thunk* we had heard when the Prince was murdered. To my astonishment and horror, I saw that Ms Clancy had raised her revolver to Delagney's breast. The ten rounds per second would go straight through the detective and into your humble narrator. "I know why you've brought me here, Mr Delagney. You mean to force a confession from me now and then twist it to your own ends – the great detective overcoming a wicked, murderous woman. But not today."

"A word to the wise, Ms Clancy. When carrying a pistol, it is sensible to check that it is loaded."

She glanced down at her weapon. "But—"

Delagney made a swift motion, gripping the barrel and wrenching it from her grasp before her finger could tighten on the trigger. It clattered away into the turbines below us. "As I said, it is sensible to check beforehand so that one's enemy cannot distract one. Now. Let us talk like civilised folk."

"Earnest was a brute to my poor Duchess!" Clancy snapped. "He treated her like nothing but chattel, scorning her opinion and her help whenever she tried to offer it. Is it any wonder that she sought solace in another's arms when he had been doing so for their whole sham of a marriage?"

"But... Ms Clancy and the Duchess?" I looked from Clancy to Delagney. "Surely such a thing..."

Delagney gave me a pitying look. "Try to note how people react to the suggestion of marital dispute between a prominent celebrity couple, Dwyer. It will save you time in the long run. Most would be shocked, but Ms Clancy here barely batted an eyelid – not even as much as society might expect her to. She is jaded."

"Thank you," snapped Clancy icily.

"No offence meant. The generator was an inspired idea of yours – each of you. Dwyer, checking it was very cunning; I was wondering when I would have to suggest that. And Ms Clancy!" He bowed. "Reprogramming the cleaning automaton with the instructions for one of your bipeds!"

So that was why not a single living soul had passed the door – a robot, a soulless mechanical device!

"Though the poor thing exploded." She shook her head. "I heard you mention the mess in the room and knew the game was up. And now, I suppose, you want to know about the crossbow?"

"Crossbow?" Delagney looked confused. "But Ms Clancy, you know as well as I do that there never was a crossbow. Crossbows of that make have a very peculiar twang which, once heard, is not easily forgotten. No such twang occurred when Earnest was being murdered. No; when I checked beneath your chair earlier, I saw the scorch marks and the small holes of the bullets you discharged at the same time you threw that crossbow bolt. You would have made a fine darts player."

"I am." Ms Clancy nodded. "I suppose there will be little room for darts in prison. Or past the gallows."

"You mistake me, my dear Ms Clancy." Delagney smiled briefly – so briefly that I almost missed it. "Did you not overpower us by threat of your revolver just now, and tie us both to that stair-rod with this very length of string I happen to have in my pocket? Did you not toss that same revolver into the turbines... which, any moment now, will jam and cause the airship to drift down into the impenetrable forest? Did you not seize a chance to leave in *that escape pod there*? And did you not help yourself to the Prince's signet ring so that you and the Duchess could leave swiftly for some other country before the airship is recovered and the news reaches the court?"

A smile spread across Ms Clancy's face as he handed her the string. "Mr Delagney, I find I have mistaken you. You are quite the romantic at heart."

"As you said. Sometimes I would make an arrest here. But not today."

"Hey!" I interjected. "If you think I mean to be tied up with none but Delagney to listen to in a crashing airship, then—"

But, as ever, nobody was listening to your humble narrator, the great detective's assistant!

Detective stories are hard with multiple authors all potentially going at cross purposes, but this one worked quite well. The setting-up and dismissal of multiple suspects reminded me of Agatha Christie's style more than any others—Alex Colesmith

Editor's Review

I loved this chain! It was so fun trying to figure out whodunnit as the chain went along, knowing that the authors likely didn't know either. And yet, as happens so often in Chainwriting, it all tied together beautifully in the end. This wasn't an official genre shuffle chain, but I definitely enjoyed the mashup between detective fiction and steampunk, two genres that seem made for each other.

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

The Case of the Prince's Throat

Letting One Slip

Calamity

Air of Mystery

Mile Die Club

Strangeling

Alex Sandground

It's a strange thing that has come from the sea. Some of the youngest skip about it where it lies, shouting and laughing. Their soft bare feet pluck wet sand from its bed. Others huddle low nearby, squatting like crabs. They lean close to whisper its names in the ears of their friends. One hand points, the other cups the skull. Breathless giggles part hair like the breeze.

The older children come marching when they hear, over the grass and down to the beach with sticks and stones in hand. Leaving their game pieces strewn on the ground. Stuck shells and seaweed pave the path of their striding column, and the little ones scatter like the froth of a wave before it. The bigger ones do not squat about the thing, when they find it. They know how to stand on two strong feet.

It's not as good as it sounded. Doesn't it do anything? It's not much to look at. Just a squashed wet mound. Splayed on its back, still, shapeless, limp, dark, slick. No features to speak of. Like a soft sea-smooth stone gone to rot. Smaller than they'd hoped, too. Could fit in a cooking-pot. The suspicious point of a stick jabs down. Nothing happens, so the stick comes down again. Perhaps a little harder. The thing goes black. It was dark before, but now it's black. And it squeezes into itself, for a second, maybe, no more. And goes still.

They gasp. It moved! A foot comes down. Huge flat flesh plants down hard, right in the middle of the thing. Breaths hush as its skin presses down, down, down. The whole rest of the thing bloats beneath the weight. Its opacity

breaks. And curtains of colour ripple out from its heart, a glossy silvery spectrum dancing on its surface like the iridescence of oil: pink, green, red, white, blue, purple. And the watchers shout and point and clutch at their neighbours as slow black ink leaks from beneath it, stinking, spreading. The children hop backwards as the cold liquid slips over their toes. They can't get away fast enough. At the front they push back, at the back they push forwards, they want a better look. Hands claw shoulders. Toes stretch, necks crane. Disgust tugs mouth-corners, wrinkles noses. Jeers and noise and laughter burst from their ring of flesh.

Do it again, do it again! Sticks and toes and groping fat fingers swarm down. The soft translucent dermis bends taut in a flurry of quick concavities. It squishes, pulses, shudders, tenses, throbs. High voices hoot and cackle. Its colours slide over it, faster and faster, red, green, purple, orange, brown. Grey sand blackens beneath the drumbeat of ink-stained feet. The younger ones are watching too, now, eyes wide, round lips slack.

When the thing stirs, the children run. None of them goes first, but they all go. Their circle bursts in all directions like fingers unclenching a fist. It doesn't move fast. Its locomotion is like a worm's. It bulges and contracts from end to end. Inches over the sand.

Come away, children, the wise mother calls. Come and greet your fathers, back from the hunt. She doesn't know this thing, but she knows that it is strange. Every child of the seashore knows when a thing is strange.

Cube Root

Gabriel Ong, Jack, Anon., Chilli, Isaac, Gwendolen Sellers, Teeth, Alex Colesmith, Ronan Long

CW: Body horror, blood, strong language

It was another cold rainy night in Ziggurat City, and the air tasted like effluent and cigarettes.

Kal stood on the rooftop of Seong-ju Corporation HQ calibrating the scope of her sniper rifle, watching the spaceport's automatons unload an Aasgaard Biosciences container. Kal yawned, and her cyberdeck chimed to indicate a successful breach into the spaceport's ICE just as a Cargo Frame was preparing to open the container.

Kal shifted her gaze to her cyberdeck, which displayed all drone traffic in the area, and found what she was looking for immediately – Unit A99-40J carrying a gamma ray emitter, exactly where her Handler had promised it would be. She took control of the drone, positioning it above the Cargo Frame, and waited.

The Cargo Frame entered the container and soon re-emerged carrying a water tank of sorts, except the "water" was green and there was a vaguely humanoid shape inside it. As the Frame passed directly under her drone, Kal fired a shot at Unit A99-40J's payload, sending a 12.7x99mm NATO round into the gamma ray emitter's shielding. Kal thought she saw the thing in the tank squirm, but she killed that thought like she killed her cyberdeck's connection, and within 60 seconds she was packed up and taking the elevator down.

Kal took out her holo-phone and checked her SoloGigz app. Her Handler had left her a 5-star review, and even added a tip of 200 credits for her trouble. Not that she had trouble, she'd been doing this for years now. Kal scrolled through the list of nearby gigs, all of which bored her to death. She had seen almost every possible permutation of assassination and espionage, and if she was being honest with herself, she was getting kind of burnt-out at this point. As she reached the bottom of the list, she finally found a slightly interesting burglary gig within 5 minutes' walk; the Handler had a 4.9-star rating and was offering 50000 credits. She accepted the gig as she walked out the front door of Seong-ju Corporation.

It was another cold rainy night in Ziggurat City.

The rain soaked her hood as she made her way towards the manhole in the middle of the road. Kal had a spring in her step. An exciting job, for one. The slight bounce in the neoprene street, for two. The road she walked on stretched like a tent across the gap between buildings, covering the rivers beneath. Checking her shoulder, Kal cracked the lid of the manhole and slipped under the road.

Thick cables held the walkway to the underside of the road. As she landed on the slick metal her boots clicked,

their MYCE foam expanding into the mesh. Not that she heard the click. One of the rivers of Ziggurat City roared beneath her, crashing against the lower walls of the Seong-ju Offices. Thousands of tonnes of raw sewage flushed through the pipes of the city. Kal savoured the familiar scents, her face backlit by the ambient glow of Ziggurat filth. Drones stamped with Environmental Waste Management lettering whirred around the walls and the surface of the river, picking out valuable scraps.

SoloGigz beeped at her. Wary of the risk of a not-so-gentle electroshock reminder, Kal marched down the walkway towards her burglary. The building she was being sent to was a level down from Seong-ju and the spaceport. Around the corner of the walkway, the river dropped out of view. The rivers had to move down Ziggurat's layers somehow. Peering over the edge, she watched the flow fall through the lattice of roads, rivers and the towers that they connected, plunging into another river below. Closer to the opening of the waterfall, the walkway had a gentle swing while she walked. Kal reached her exit, marked by a manhole cover with a faded sponsor, 'You Wa.. Fuel? W.. Got...Fuel'. She emerged on a lower level, on a new street.

It was another cold rainy night in Ziggurat City, and here the air tasted like cheap perfume and sin. Kal didn't envy the lot of those who worked down here. She pulled her coat tighter round her shoulders, the Chem-tech fabric using its photocells to blend with the dark colours of the street.

It was busier down here than she had thought it would be, especially this late on such a cold night. Leering spacemen in their Corposuits gathered in clusters like hungry vultures waiting for a piece of meat to fall in front of them. Alongside, mini bots chimed in a discordant choir about new deals and new disasters, while pretty children tried to shill the latest Energy-Matter converter upgrades ("Only fifty credits!" "Well *mine* is only thirty!" "Yeah- but- but-you- smell"). Kal slipped through them all like so much smoke on the wind, staying away from the doorways covered in beaded curtains which she knew held gambling dens or black-market dealers or worse.

A little further down, the crowds thinned. Beyond the shiny commercial veneer only a street or two away, propped up 'houses', as many as three stacked atop each other, swung drunkenly along the street edges, housing the poor bastards who had to keep this whole place running. Kal counted five up, two across. A little hole in the wall, accessible by scrap-metal ladders. Her target. This was going to be so much fun. Kal pulled up SoloGigz again, and let her host know she had begun.

It was another cold rainy night in Ziggurat City, as Kal scaled the ladders with a trained ease, each foot barely touching the rung before rocketing her upwards. It wouldn't be the best way of entering if there were any witnesses, she knew, but she also knew that she had been hired to burgle, not to necessarily have the theft go unnoticed.

The clang of metal-on-metal was swallowed up in the general din, softer here but still blissfully giving Kal anonymity in numbers. She'd grown up around these parts before her business, such as it was, had really taken off, and so she swung, graceful as a cat, skipping the middle ladder as she landed perfectly in front of the little door to her target. "Little" being the operative word – Kal wasn't particularly tall, but she had almost to crawl to get through. Inside, the ceiling wasn't much better, forcing her to perpetually duck.

Despite the seeming disrepair from the outside, the inside of the hovel was furnished as if it housed a Wheaster, those select few who were so wealthy that they could implant their consciousnesses into the Cloud, with an army of robots taking care of their residences until they saw fit to beam themselves back into a robotic body - a Cyberman. Nearly tripping over a circular cleaning robot, Kal surveyed the dark room, torch in hand, searching.

In the low light, the humanoid Cyberman shell lying haphazardly in the corner almost looked like a shadow, and Kal's attention was briefly drawn, before she returned to searching.

Aha! There it was, a cardboard box, sitting almost hidden along the wall, yet standing out among the rest for its brown color, out of place in a world of silvers and golds. The words 'The Holy Macguffin', in a once vibrant red ink, were faded to practically unreadable even by torchlight, and the cobwebs covering only it among the clutter were a surprising sight. Kal approached it, considering the best way to transport it out, but heard a new whirring at her back.

She turned in time to see a serving robot walk past the open door. With breathing, balance, and motion in a heightened control for the disturbance, she stepped back to the door with deliberate foot placement. Correcting her previous mistake, she shut the door and switched on the light.

Kal wrapped her arms about the box and lifted it from its precarious placement on the pile beneath. It was light. Amongst the room's ostensibly more valuable contents, a cardboard box was not the obvious item to take, nor did its bulk seem to justify the price offered for its exchange of ownership. Maybe she would return, on her own time, for the room's shinier loot.

Given the box's weight, it would be safer to drop it the height of the ladder, and climb down after it, rather than risk crushing it in the practice of moving down hand over hand. She saw no one below. She aimed the placement of the box and dropped it. Sliding the first few metres, she lowered her weight groundward in seconds. Yet, in those seconds, a shilling child had emerged from behind debris to turn over the box and was sifting through its packing.

Kal waved the child off with clenched fist. She reoriented the box and was about to pick it up when she saw a corner of the object within, uncovered by the child's curiosity. She picked up the box, closing the top flaps. She pulled up the drop-off location to project navigation in front of her face. She had recognised the device in the box from her partial glimpse. It was only a couple of blocks away, ten minutes' walk. Contract killing and theft was no challenge to her conscience, but this exceeded the magnitude of her past criminal participation by a large margin. Pulse elevated and audible, she bowed her head as she walked along the street. What was there to do? She had already taken it.

An unknown face appeared before her; her handler wanted to talk.

Now this was a blatant violation of SoloGigz's terms and services - handlers and Gigzters™ meeting was a massive no-no and in any other situation Kal would've been quite indignant. The *whole point* of the app was that it meant so-called handlers didn't have to play any real hand in whatever acts they were commissioning. Further dehumanise the already inhuman act of taking a life - removes a fair chunk of the guilt y'know? Not that the wealthy in Ziggurat city gave much of a damn about the sanctity of life anyways, but it's much more pleasant to click a button and treat the whole ordeal as nothing more than a food order than come face-to-face with it all. Face-to-face with the fact that you're hiring a real life good-for-nothing to dirty their hands with the blood of another in the hopes that they'll be able to eat tonight.

And fuck it, Kal was good at her job - and she certainly wasn't good at people.

She stalled, flitting her eyes between the shadowy figure before her and the various alleyways around her. There wasn't much point attempting to make a run for it at this stage, they'd definitely seen her, but she couldn't deny that it was extremely tempting.

"Drop-off location is compromised. Leave the package directly with me." The handler had a surprisingly calming voice - maybe charisma enhancements or something.

"Um- You'll- uh, shit um-" Kal cursed that she hadn't interacted with someone who wasn't her cat in weeks. "You'll need to update the uh- the delivery location on the app, otherwise I'll get fined for an incorrect delivery location." Whilst not a lie, it was also nigh impossible to edit the delivery location - so if the handler agreed to not get her fined, they were at an impasse for at least a little bit. And any time was more time to mull over the package's contents.

Blessed be to incomprehensible UX design for delaying moral dilemmas.

There was a pause, the handler clearly thinking over which of killing her immediately for the package, forcing her to take the fine or navigating the app's Kafkaesque options menus was more of a nuisance.

"Follow me," they said.

Well, at least they'd not picked to kill her immediately.

* * *

Hyro took a long drag from a cigarette, and used his other hand to scan the streets below, feeling bored and not just a little restless. He had been waiting for over ten minutes now, and so far, no one had shown the slightest bit of interest in the pinned 'interception location'. How long was he supposed to crouch in this dirty little shanty for? Had the listing been nothing more than a cruel joke?

When he had first noticed the SoloGigz job he had been startled, sure- I mean how often were you asked to assist in the recovery of the Hyper Cube? He had heard the stories, but like many other kids born in the squalid horror of the Ziggurat underbelly, he had quickly lost interest in fairy tales. Better to concentrate on the more urgent present.

He sighed and pushed off through the opening, landing noiselessly on the biological walkway below, then dropping his cigarette as the violent holo-phone shock resounded through his body.

"Calm down," he muttered irritably. "If the site has been detected as compromised, I'll have better luck on the ground."

He crouched, peering through the gap in the railings, and slapped his on-the-blink holowatch irritably until it flickered back to life. New battery, that was the first thing he was going to buy with this job. Yep, that was the Cube there, coming around the corner – and right on cue, through his enhanced night vision, he saw the shadowy figure turn the corner of the building and head along the walkway opposite and one floor down.

Hyro's watch flickered again, blurring the location of the Cube – but he knew where it had to be. That tatty cardboard box the second figure was carrying, right? It was almost coming apart in the rain; thoroughly unprofessional. Better hand it over to someone who'd take proper care of it.

He raised the snub-nosed EMP gun to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger.

* * *

According to the adverts, there is less than a 0.002% chance of a new holowatch implant malfunctioning severely.

The figures for ten-year-old, severely battered, cheaply hacked holowatches are less reliable, but they're unlikely to be more than one in two hundred. Holowatches have enough backup systems that they can practically repair themselves, and the chances of one failing *at any given moment* is so vanishingly small as to be nonexistent.

Unless, of course, your watch is already on the blink and you're firing an EMP gun on a cold, damp night. And even then, it has to be an *old* EMP gun – one with half the plastic guard worn off – and Hyro's trigger finger had to be made of metal.

Fortunately for Kal, all these things were precisely true.

* * *

There was a brief flash of blue, and Hyro spasmed as the electricity coursed through his body. The EMP gun tilted upwards, knocking out a substation and a couple of drones as it went off but missing Kal.

She whipped around as she noticed the flash. Swearing – still in the same calming tones, though less convincingly now – her handler dived for cover behind the narrow walkway barrier. Kal quickly followed suit.

Hyro, on the other walkway, dropped the gun and clawed at his sparking watch, tearing it from his skin with wires and blood trailing. He spat, enraged, then leapt with inhuman speed and power over the gap between the two walkways.

In Kal's hands, the box began to vibrate. A faint red glow emanated from within.

"Oh, this is the last thing I need," she muttered.

Hyro landed two-footed next to her, making the whole walkway rock.

"Give. Me. The. Box."

Kal's hands moved without her own volition, swinging the Hyper Cube up. Its nanite surface rippled, manipulating probability around it, twisting itself into *just* the right thing for this version of reality.

The shield blocked Hyro's first punch with a loud clang and a sickening crack. His eyes widened in shock and pain; used to his metal hand tearing through flesh and blood, he'd never thought to reinforce his elbow joint.

The Hyper Cube *twisted* again.

It was another cold, rainy night in Ziggurat City. The rain hissed acidic on skin, shooting, fast-flashing streaks, nothing like water: rain that left scars. The clouds were bright with projected advertisements and the street was teeming with silent life, looking down, walking fast, ignoring things. Pretending not to notice when Hyro started screaming. The cube morphed, stretched out, now a thorned cable wrapped around his forearm. It gripped on tight, dug in.

"You don't know what you're holding," he shouted between gasps. "The people, the thing, that hired you? They sent me. You've been set up – we both have. It won't stop until you're dead beside me. Hand over the cube and we can both walk away. You're fighting for the wrong side, girl."

"I don't know, man. The way I see it, I'm just fighting for me."

The silver receded, and where Hyro's hand had been, there was a charred stump. It stretched out again, thin tendrils eating through his left leg, where the metal carapace he'd built joined the flesh, spreading like flames, biting into his right, rising, frenzied, silver flames, dissolv-

ing the other hand. The screaming stopped when his face disappeared in the frothing gleam. The silver fell hissing to the floor, not loud enough to cover up the snapping and tearing of the body being ripped apart inside. A cube again, pulsing red.

"Jesus."

She picked it up, looked around — no sign of her handler, time to leave the area. She saw the cube shine, slick with rain and blood, and grow slicker. A shard of Hyro's wrist-mechanism had come off and embedded itself in her chest. Her hand came away from her shirt black, slippery and hot with blood and oil.

"Jesus Christ."

Steam rose from the wound and clouded in the street-light, she was dizzy from the blood-loss and the impact, the bright reds on the clouds, "SEONG-JU: HERE 4 YOU" began to grow dimmer, she could feel sleep settling in. The cube twisted again, and began to flow shimmering into her, stopping the gap and coating her breaking body in shining chrome.

The handler stayed gone. It didn't mean he wasn't the client; how else would he have spotted her? An old trick, to hire one thief to rob the target, and another to rob them, so nobody in the know is left alive. But the cube

had sided with her, was her, now. Hyro's tendons snapping echoed in her head, and she was trying not to breathe too loud. Whoever had sent Hyro wouldn't blink about killing her for the cube. She couldn't let go of their treasure if she wanted to.

Her phone buzzed and the credits came in for the job. If she'd died how they'd planned, the shock collar would've thrown the body around like a galvanised frog, drawing some unwanted attention — they'd closed a deal with a dead woman to cover their tracks. They'd come down like vultures now, probably were on their way already. All they'd find were scraps of Hyro, and her holo-phone smashed in the gutter with him — after she'd cashed the credits, bounced them around til they lost the stink of death, and bought a one-way ticket heading way out of town.

It'd be her first time out of the city, but still, it couldn't be worse than staying, waiting around to be killed. She'd hit the wastes, drift from place to place. Life on the run beat having the silver cut out of her body, beat being carrion for the scuttling shadows, lying shattered in the wet, shining street like Hyro.

Another cold night in Ziggurat city came to an end. The clouds stayed low, but glowed dawn grey-white behind the advertisements. Kal didn't even notice it was day. She didn't look up. She was never looking back again.

Author Reviews: Cube Root

I like where this went! The recurring theme could have been very cringey but is actually fun and sets the gritty cyberpunk scene very well. Despite the overall nihilist outlook, it manages to make a very satisfying story.—Alex Colesmith

Editor's Review

We recently had a CUSFS meeting discussing whether the genre of cyberpunk was dead, but I'd argue that this thrilling chain is good evidence that it's not. The world was so vivid and engaging and it really drew me in, even if it's definitely not somewhere I'd be interested in visiting.

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

Cold Ziggurats, Hot Blood

Crossed Wires

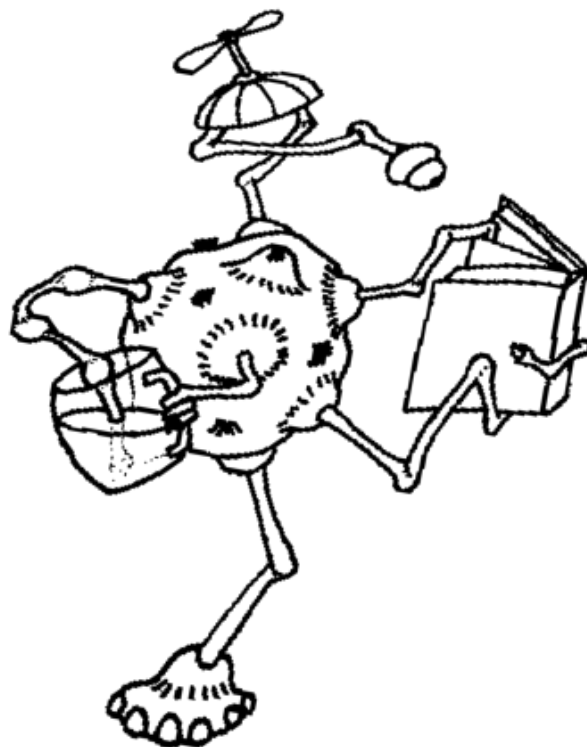
Set a Thief...

Volts and Dreams

Another Cold Rainy Night in Ziggurat City

Never Meet Your Hyroes

Climbing the Ziggurat



The Cuddly Alien—Jeremy Henty